Kind of a Fast Reader

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Kind of a Fast Reader

by McRibFarewellTour

Summary

Will realizes that things have started going wrong since meeting his psychiatrist, so he decides to do some investigating. What follows is a few weeks of mistrust, revenge, and confessions unlike any other time in his life.

Featuring Will Graham's eclectic taste in music, rapidly devolving moral compass, and general self-loathing attitude

One of Many Fateful Margarita Nights

Chapter Notes

> Look, I wrote it, I thought about it a long time, I put it here. If you hate it, please do not tell me. If the formatting is bad, please do tell me.

Will knew he could never say these words aloud, but it was Beverly's fault.

It wasn't a bright spot in Will's life to be sitting at a fucking *Applebee's* with Beverly and Price to celebrate it being the end of the work week. As with most places he found himself at this time in his life, he had no fucking clue how he got there, the last thing he remembered was spilling his coffee that morning and almost sobbing out of sheer overwhelm. He, for lack of a better term, *woke up* in the middle of $1 Margarita night with an empty glass in front of him and a half-gone, bright-blue one next to it. Trying to seem normal, he blinked hard, making himself focus.

"It's just insane to me," Beverly was saying, and Will did his best to tune in. "She starts dating this girl, suddenly everything in her life has gone to shit."

Price laughed. "That doesn't mean anything! It's probably just a coincidence."

"No such thing." Beverly's voice was certain. "I just can't imagine that. Everything starts going wrong, and you don't think to look for new things in your life?"

As someone whose life was falling apart, this was hitting a little too close to home. "Do you really think that? You think this girl is ruining your friend's life?"

Beverly rolled her eyes. "Since when are you so naive, Will? I thought your thing was to *analyze the evidence* . Dependent variable is the quality of life, you think there's no independent variable? Just a random decrease?"

"She's got a point," Jimmy conceded.

Will briefly considered saying *well, my quality of life has decreased; What's the correlation there?* But he didn't need people knowing how truly dark things had gotten in his life. *It doesn't matter, I'm different.* "Is she going to break up with her?"

“No, she doesn’t believe me,” Beverly said. “They never believe me in time, everybody thinks they’re different.” Well, that was concerning.

The topic changed, something about the new season of *Love Island.* Will heard none of it. All he could do was look back over his life, when everything started falling apart. He killed Hobbs, he started losing time, he was clumsy, he had lost weight, he had a constant headache.

When next he was conscious, he was at home, lying in bed. He had gone through every possible explanation, only one made sense.

Hannibal Lecter. It all came back to Hannibal. Hannibal was there when he killed Hobbs, was almost obsessive in his interest in Will’s feelings on the matter. Hannibal had orchestrated an *after hours scan* with a neurologist that *he was friends with* . Hannibal had set him up to alienate himself from Jack, from Alana, from everyone.

He curled into a ball and cried.

Cried because he *loved* Hannibal. For the first time in his life, he had felt accepted, cared for, *seen* . He heard the psychiatrist’s words in his head almost constantly. *I don’t care about the lives you save, I care about your life.* Dr. Lecter was possibly the only person to have ever genuinely cared for Will.

And it was a lie. All of it was a lie. And for what?

Will stopped himself. There was no proof that it was Hannibal. No proof that this was any more than a compelling explanation for an unpleasant coincidence. But it could be solved. It could be proven. Finally, some concrete evidence was presenting itself.

The next day, Will scheduled an appointment with a neurologist in D.C. By the end of the week, he could have the answer.

The appointment was stupid. He knew the answer.

It wasn’t like Will had never seen the darkness that hid in his psychiatrist’s eyes. But what was a little darkness exchanged for acceptance? He had called Will his friend. His *friend*.

Was it so wrong to assume that Will was therefore exempt from Hannibal's… Wrath? Misdeeds?

He considered skipping his therapy appointment, but knew that it would raise alarm bells and offset his results. With this in mind, he spoke to Dr. Lecter at the usual time. He allowed himself to fall apart at the appointment, even managing to squeeze a few crocodile tears out. He whined around about guilt over killing Hobbs, which was usually one of Hannibal's favorite topics. As per usual, the psychiatrist jumped on it.

God, it was all so obvious now. Hannibal's assurance came in the form of telling him subtly that he was in the right, that killing Hobbs didn't make him a bad person, that it was growth for him to take a life.

Though Will had gotten through the entire appointment without alerting Hannibal to his plight, something in his expression must've shifted. Hannibal caught him by the elbow on his way out the door and pulled him back, looking into his face with a calculating stare. Will returned the expression, trying to look as pitiful as possible. With tenderness so powerful it sickened him, the psychiatrist pressed his palm to Will's forehead, and Will didn't have to force the tear that slipped from his eye at the knowledge that this was pretend. "Will, are you alright?"

Will sniffled, knowing that he wasn't faking anymore. "Just thinking about Abigail, you know. I mean she believed her father… Cared for her." He shook his head, batting a very real tear away from his cheek and making himself meet Hannibal's eyes. "I just can't imagine how it must feel to learn that it was all a lie."

Hannibal's head cocked sideways. "Will-"

Will shrugged and turned away. "Thank you, Dr. Lecter."

Gunpowder and Lead

Anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis.

He had a serious, deadly medical condition. And Hannibal *knew* .

It had been early in knowing his psychiatrist that Hannibal had mentioned his sense of smell, how it helped him as a surgeon to be able to diagnose patients from a smell alone. *Did you just smell me?* Stupid, stupid, stupid. Will had mistakenly considered the smelling incident endearing, either an indication that Hannibal lacked social skills, like Will, or that Hannibal's affection for him was like Will's. The way Will found the smell of Hannibal's car soothing for its familiarity, he had thought, maybe *hoped* , that it was like that.

Instead, it was just that there was something wrong with him. Just like everyone else, his intrigue was because Will was… Damaged.

He couldn't decide where to go from here. His first instinct was to break into Hannibal's house and kill him. Will would strangle him, so he could look into his psychiatrist's eyes as the light left them. *You wanted a killer, Dr. Lecter? I'll show you a killer.* That was a little *Gunpowder and Lead* , but it would be immensely satisfying.

His second was to leave. Pack up his dogs, sell his house, and relocate back to New

Orleans. Fix more boats, go back to being alone and unseen. He would deprive Hannibal of any explanation, of seeing the results of his experiment. No closure, no more interaction, no clue what happened. That one held even more appeal than the other, as killing Hannibal would satisfy the psychiatrist. Will's departure would leave him confused and bereft.

His third was to play along. He'd need a week to be in the hospital for treatment with a central line, that was doable. He'd say he was on vacation, needed a break. It seemed unlikely that Hannibal would like that, but he couldn't reasonably stop him. Especially if Will left before mentioning it. Will wanted to put his dogs with Alana or Beverly, but he knew that Hannibal would find out. Seeing as his brain was on fire, he couldn't really tell why he thought that was a bad idea, but he was sure that it was. So, against his better judgment, he organized for his dogs to spend the week in a kennel in Fredericksburg. Then, he thought better of how close that was to Wolf Trap and resolved to take them to Richmond instead.

He dropped the dogs off and called Jack on his way back to Wolf Trap, saying he was going to New Orleans for vacation. When Jack inevitably told Hannibal, the tie to his past would pique his interest and make him more likely to go there to search for him, not to first think of the hospital. Or, maybe, Hannibal would think he went to Minnesota. Will's fake vacation was starting to sound sort of fun, he regretted that he'd actually be spending it in Intensive Care.

It was becoming more and more clear to Will that his paranoia, though overpowering, would prove an asset in hiding. He called a few local businesses in New Orleans and bought things with his credit card from all of them. He searched directions to Louisiana in case his search history was checked, then put his phone in the mail to one of businesses, where they had agreed to hold on to it for him until his return. In a frenzy, he drove to a Walmart and bought new clothes, wearing a medical face mask and a ballcap, then changed into the new ones and threw the old ones in the dumpster behind the complex. Finally, he parked his car at the airport and took a Greyhound to D.C., paying in cash and telling the driver to keep the change.

The doctors told him what he knew, which was that he wouldn't be better in a week, but he'd be well enough to continue his treatments from home, pills and checkups and so on.

He wondered if Hannibal knew he was gone yet. The decision not to tell him was deliberate and was a conscious move to offend him. Though fake, Hannibal considered Will his friend (fake friend), and he had to hear about Will's spontaneous departure from Jack. That would certainly piss him off.

The first two days of his treatment, Will was in a hallucination-filled sleep-adjacent haze. It was incredibly painful. Filled with Hannibal. Hannibal killing Will, Hannibal fucking Will, Will gunning Hannibal down with his car, and the *memories* were worse than anything. Memories of every time Hannibal had defended him, cared for him, all of them riddled with deceit.

The following days, he plotted.

He considered why Hannibal had done this to him, and could come up with no reason other than that he was a fucking science project. Hannibal's willingness to do that was… Alarming. Why would Hannibal set him up? Why the extensive effort to alienate and discredit him? It

couldn't only be scientific interest. And why was he so quick to encourage Will to murder? To frame him? To understand him?

To be understood?

And then, like hot glass shattering, it made sense: The Copycat Killer. Someone with the details of cases, someone who could distract and further discredit and isolate Will, who would be able to check up on how that was going? And why did he need Will discredited and isolated? Just because he might figure out who Hannibal was? Or was there a plan in place to pin things on Will?

He needed to know the sincerity of Hannibal's care. Was it just to keep access to his favorite experiment? His favorite person to frame? Or was the value of Will's empathy enough to keep the allure of *being seen* alive?

His plan was twofold: firstly, he needed to test Hannibal's reaction to his science project becoming boring. He would begin to appear normal, cease to appear sick, but continue to be his usual, empathic, psychotic self. If Hannibal lost interest, Will would know that he was truly only a science project.

Secondly, he needed to test whether Hannibal had any actual affection for him. Hannibal Lecter (the Copycat Killer), unlike what people thought, was no psychopath. He had emotions, they were just… Different. After a week of hiding in a hospital and intermittent crying and raging, Will was confident in his conclusions. Hannibal was a killer, he did harbor some attachment to Will, but not enough to outweigh his entertainment value.

The Copycat Killer was a hunter, and a beautiful one at that, and Will was unlikely to derive satisfaction from hunting Hannibal. Fishing, though? Hooking and suffocating Hannibal in a situation of his own making? Even the thought had him biting back a smile.

In the meantime, he needed to be cautious with what he said to the psychiatrist. He was no longer hallucinating, but he needed alibis. Lots of alibis, and Hannibal needed not to know about them.

Briefly, he considered that the worst part of all of this was that he was going to have to be social.

On Saturday, he was allowed to leave. Catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror, Will winced. He looked… Terrible. Skinny and pale with dark circles under puffy eyes. Whatever. Time to get some fucking answers.

Will hopped on the Greyhound back to the airport, took his car to go pick up his dogs, and found his phone in his mailbox, having arrived that very day. He had two missed calls from Alana and Jack, and four from Hannibal, accompanying six texts of varying anxiety levels. There was Hannibal's usual brand of pervasive dignity, but Will could tell the psychiatrist wasn't happy. Will had a vague sort of temptation to just go on ignoring Hannibal to see what would happen, but that would raise more alarm bells than Will could easily explain away.

Will Graham *: Hey, sorry for the delayed response. I got home today.*

The response came uncharacteristically quickly.

Dr. Lecter *: Will, I'm glad you returned safely. Your departure was*

alarming in its abruptness. Would you like to come to dinner tonight?

Will scowled, loudly thinking the words, *not particularly.*

Will Graham: *On such late notice? I wouldn't want to impose…*

Hell was real and he was in it.

Dr. Lecter: *You could never impose. Come by around 8?*

The creature in Will with a substantial death wish longed to respond, *whatever.* Will leashed it.

Will Graham: *See you then .*

He reconsidered taking his dogs and running away to an undisclosed location. Teeth grinding, he made himself take a deep breath and prepare. Prepare to act like he didn't *despise* Hannibal fucking Lecter. In the meantime, he drafted a text to their lab group chat, then shuddered at how embarrassing it was to be begging for friends, so deleted it and resolved just to talk to Beverly.

Will was torn about what to wear to Hannibal's. He heard his own laughter in his head, and the accusation of *nervous schoolgirl* drifted through. On one hand, he could play up his meekness. Wear the usual ill-fitting clothes, even baggier now than they had been when he left.

He couldn't do that. He wanted Hannibal to, on some level, register a threat. So he wore a black button-down and black trousers, trying to speak confidence into existence. Every time he began to waver, he played back, *I don't care about the lives you save, I care about your life* . At the reminder, a wave of clarity would wash over him, quieting his shaking hands and racing thoughts.

When he did one final glance-over in the mirror, he was almost proud to see the sprawling antlers sprouting from his head.

Drowning in Two Feet of Water

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Knocking on Hannibal Lecter's door felt a little like being a pallbearer at his own funeral. He wasn't going to just lie there and take this, not anymore.

Drowning in two feet of water. That's what his father used to say. He meant to describe people who willingly stayed in a dire situation and refused to hear any way out. Briefly, Will considered that he was doing just that, and that he should leave. Go *away* , maybe Montana? Maybe the Czech Republic, he'd always wanted to see Prague.

Hannibal (*no* , he scolded himself--) *Dr. Lecter* opened the door, and Will heard it: *I don't care about the lives you save.* He bit back a snarl. *I care about your life.* "Hello, Will. I'm glad to see you. Won't you come in?"

Will gave him a half-smile and tried to ignore the water filling his lungs.

To an outsider, things probably looked normal. Hannibal took his coat, served him a fanciful dinner, and kept his eyes politely fixed on Will throughout. Will knew better. Hannibal (*stop it--*) *Dr. Lecter* inhaled almost imperceptibly as he took his coat, and Will felt his perplexion, however subtle it was. He looked at the psychiatrist with big, innocent eyes, and neither acknowledged it. The dinner, while delicious, was almost definitely made of people, and the killer's eyes watched Will consume it almost obsessively.

In the interest of laying it on thick, Will smiled placidly at the doctor. "It's delicious, Hannibal, thank you."

Oh , very interesting. Despite the fact that, until recently, in his mind, he almost exclusively used the psychiatrist's first name (more recently, he just called him *jackass*), he never said it aloud. Dr. Lecter was excellent at hiding his emotions, but Will was equally excellent at reading them, especially now that he was focusing and healthy-adjacent. The use of his first name made Hannibal feel… *Visible* . A title, like Dr. Lecter, was perfect for establishing distance, Will knew that. It's why he had forced himself to stop using 'Hannibal' so often since discovering his betrayal. Like seeing something from far away, the title and its

consequent distance kept the psychiatrist blurry. Right now, he felt like he was under a microscope.

Speaking slowly, as usual, but sounding decidedly more calculated, Hannibal lamented. “I was worried about you, Will. To disappear without word to your friends is uncharacteristic of you.” It had an air of confession.

Will kept his face carefully, distantly apologetic. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking straight. It’s why I had to get away, I feel much more normal now.” He huffed a laugh with false self-deprecation. “This is just the first stop on the Will Graham Apology Tour.”

Hannibal smiled, endeared. *You’ve underestimated me, Dr. Lecter. There are lures that look like something other than food.* “Consider it an auspicious start. How was your pilgrimage back to the south?”

Oh, besides the fact that it didn’t happen? Great! “Rejuvenating.”

“You’ve not expressed much affection for your upbringing in our conversations, I was surprised that you considered a journey to the past an opportunity for convalescence.”

Fair point . “My repudiation of the south is more for the people than the geographical location.” *Getting a little too close to vulnerability, here, Graham, get it together* . “It was an odd feeling, though. Have you ever gone back to the place where you grew up?”

God , he loved winning. The flicker of discomfort that skittered across Hannibal’s face would have been imperceptible to anyone else, but Will’s microscope was perfectly focused to catch it.

“I have returned to the place where I became a man, Italy. It is among my favorite places on Earth.” It felt like vulnerability. Will knew it couldn’t be, knew he should look away so he could stop *feeling* like he was Hannibal, laying out a breadcrumb of trivia about himself that would uncomfortably humanize him.

Let me be your paddle, Will. His heart dropped through his stomach, and, seeing both paths, chose cruelty. “Prevaricating, Dr. Lecter?”

Hannibal stared at him, and Will took a sip of wine and kept an innocent expression on his face. “Perhaps. Allow me the dignity of prevarication.” That felt like winning, until the corners of his mouth twitched minutely. “Everyone is entitled to a certain amount of discretion, wouldn’t you agree?”

I hate you, I hate you, I hate you , Will tried to repeat to himself. “I’ll be sure to pull that card in therapy. My psychiatrist will love that.”

The moment of tension passed, and Hannibal chuckled. “You seem much better, Will. Perhaps a respite from the demons Jack Crawford has you inhabiting has been even more restorative than we would have imagined.”

‘ *The demons Jack has me inhabiting’, bitch, do you mean* you?

‘We’ language always irked Will. *We will get you through this* , *we will get this under control, we would like to test him for…* It had irked him because it felt disingenuous. Until Hannibal, who truly felt as though he was at Will’s side, as though they were a team. And wasn’t that just the saddest fucking thing he’d ever heard?

His heart was pounding, he wanted to leave, it felt like the room was a thousand degrees and he could *hear* everything, could hear his own chewing, the silverware against the plates, the scratch of this stupid shirt against his skin. He squeezed his eyes closed for a moment, cracking his knuckles under the table. *Collect yourself, fall apart at home.* Taking a deep breath in, he sighed out, “s’pose so.”

They chatted for a while about banality, which helped Will settle back down a bit. He caught Hannibal staring at him, calculating, and caught his eye with a curious expression.

“Forgive the observation, but you do seem even thinner than when last I saw you. Have you been eating enough?”

Will took a pointed bite of whoever was on his plate, leveling Hannibal with an expression that could only be described as *unimpressed* .

Hannibal quirked an eyebrow, doing an almost convincing act at fond exasperation. “I’d be happy to cook for you again until you’ve stocked up on groceries. Would you like to come back tomorrow night?”

Internally, Will smirked. Externally, he made himself appear bashful and apologetic. “I have plans tomorrow night.”

To be clear, those plans were to sit at home with a bottle of whiskey and cry himself to sleep or watch a tacky movie to pretend he wasn’t a complete mess, but he didn’t feel the need to divulge that.

“Plans with whom?”

Jealous, Dr. Lecter? “What was it? Everyone is entitled to a certain amount of discretion.” Then, because he had spent this entire night oscillating between a feeling of righteous victory and truly debilitating depression, he said, “are you free the following night?”

Captivatingly, the psychiatrist seemed to perk up. He was either an excellent actor or his affection for Will wasn’t completely fake. “I am certain we can work something out.”

Excellent actor, Will decided dolefully. He stretched, back and neck cracking as he did so, and he caught Hannibal watching with barely-disguised interest. *He probably is considering that you’d make an excellent roast. Safer to stick with decrepit skeleton look.* “I should be going soon, I can help you clean up?”

“No, of course not. Though I am tempted to enlist you to do so if only to prolong your company,” He said, charming as ever.

Will felt himself thawing, then scolded himself. *He's lying, get real and play along.* "I try to walk off the stage before I'm booed off, you know. Leave 'em wanting more, and all that."

"That, you do," Hannibal murmured, as though he did not intend Will to hear. He helped Will into his coat, something that, upon further consideration, was very normal for Hannibal and super weird for anyone else. Will caught the sound of him inhaling again and tried to ignore the warring feelings of victory and sorrow in his gut.

"Thank you for dinner, Dr. Lecter. I'll see you soon."

"Yes, I imagine you will."

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry, I love Italics, inflection matters!

The Emotional Spectrum: Joan Jett to Jim Croce

Hannibal either thought Will was slightly smarter than he was or far, far stupider.

Seven hours after the beginning of his self-imposed pity party of drinking, crying, and listening to *Rumours* as though he'd been dumped, his itinerary (which next consisted of a 6:30 a.m. nap and then canceling his class to watch some sad chick flicks) was interrupted by a call from Jack Crawford demanding he come out to a scene. With barely-contained excitement, he concluded the call by saying, "And Will? It's the Ripper."

Busy wallowing in his own self-loathing, Will had lost interest in investigating the Copycat Killer. And all killers, actually, including his best customer, the Chesapeake Ripper. Nevertheless, he needed this job, and he needed to talk to Beverly, so he drove miserably to the scene in Ellicott City. Luckily, he got to finish his run through of the Fleetwood Mac album and started a mix of Joan Jett & the Blackhearts on his way there.

It was getting hard to find a brightside, okay?

The scene was… Gruesome, even for the serial killer of the generation. Not physically gruesome, though that was certainly an apt description judging by the expression on Zeller's face. Will didn't really register that. The scene was *emotionally* gruesome.

The Ripper was feeling flayed. Seen too clearly. Those three words, *seen too clearly* , put him in mind of the emotions he picked up from Hannibal the night before.

Actually, put him *exactly* in mind of that.

He rolled his eyes at himself. The Copycat Killer's MO could easily fit within that of the Chesapeake Ripper, considering the defining characteristics were artistic, emotive, and careful.

Will wasn't a math genius, despite what people stupidly assumed of him once they learned he was on the spectrum. He was only okay at math, a solid B student. But he had liked geometry class, and he remembered one unfortunately relevant rule, the stupid fucking *transitive property* . If A=B, and B=C, then A=C.

If Hannibal Lecter was The Copycat Killer, and Hannibal Lecter was the Chesapeake Ripper, then the Copycat Killer was the Chesapeake Ripper.

Hannibal was testing him. If Will's brain was still a blazing inferno, he certainly wouldn't put together their dinner last night with a Ripper kill, especially one so… Poignant.

As the Ripper's kills went, it was a little on the nose. Will didn't really know what he was doing here, this was the most obvious message ever communicated by displaying a body. A man was laid, skinned, heart removed, on the ground, next to an altar made of what appeared to be his own leg. Atop the altar was the heart-- *no,* Will corrected himself. *A* heart.

"The Ripper is in love," Price observed, and Will made a face.

Was that a joke? It did not have the cadence of a joke. "No…" Will said, testing the waters, and Price looked incredulous.

"What do you mean, no? He pulled out his heart and put it on an altar! That's love!"

Will's stupid heart stuttered with something adjacent to hope, wanting desperately to believe that. Then, he forced himself to hear Hannibal's soft, accented voice. *I was worried about you, Will.* Liar, liar, liar. He shook his hands out, trying to dispel the stiffness that had formed, then shook his head, too. "No, that's not it. He's feeling seen. Skinned. Someone…"

What the hell was he doing? It was Hannibal. He knew it was Hannibal, would bet his life on it. *So say it.* But Hannibal had been laying the groundwork to discredit Will for some time, Will had to assume. He had only recently noticed, but who knew how deep those roots went? If Will pointed at Hannibal, who he knew would *never* leave any usable evidence, it would cement the destruction of his credibility. There was no catching Hannibal, no punishment within the modern justice system that he would accept, nor one that would satisfy Will.

The Chesapeake Ripper (*Hannibal* , Will reminded himself) didn't have much respect for the judicial system. He had been killing for years, never been caught, but if he was, it would not have mattered. He would just break out again. If they tried to kill him, he'd certainly kill them first. The only suitable punishment would have to be personal. It would have to come from Will.

And, again, he thought, what the hell was he doing?

He stared at his kill again, letting the pendulum swing, as little range as it had always had with the Ripper. This kill wasn't *angry* , it was *overwhelmed.* Hannibal wasn't resentful that Will had seen… Something, apparently. He was delighted. So overcome with intrigue and quasi-relief that it poured out of him in art. *Seen.*

Will knelt by the body, rolling his lips between his teeth. "It's not love." *Who are you trying to convince?* "It's visibility."

Zeller rolled his eyes. "This should be good. Tell us, Will, how exactly is the man prostrated at the altar of a heart anything but love?"

"Let him speak," Jack said, and Will pushed the heels of his hands into his eyes.

"The Ripper encountered someone… Another killer, maybe?" *An FBI profiler?* "Someone who has understood him. He's skinned because he's been seen. The heart on the altar… It isn't his. It belongs to someone else. He feels like," Will shook his hands out again as he spoke, failing his attempt to act normal. "He feels like someone offered up a part of themselves, their heart, in this case, but he is the one who is at greater vulnerability."

Or Hannibal wants him to think that. Wants to lull him back into a position of trusting him, needing him. The thawing of Will's stupid heart reversed, and he found it colder than ever. His speech was over, and he glanced around the scene. "Where's Katz?"

"Over here!" She called out, seeming perplexed, and Will trotted over. "Is everything okay?"

“I think I kind of owe you,” he said, then berated himself for being stupidly cryptic.

“I’d like to collect on that, then.”

Will half-smiled. “Your story about your friend’s life turning upside down because of a certain person, I realized…” She raised manicured eyebrows, intrigued. “It doesn’t matter. I had sort of a come to Jesus moment about someone, so… I owe you.”

Beverly smiled, seeming amused. “Well, what are friends for?”

“Can I buy you dinner?”

“Will, I don’t date g-”

Oh, fuck, how have you ruined this so entirely? “No, no, no, that’s not what I meant. I mean, you’re gorgeous and everything, but I can’t… I *mean* that ... ” He sighed, clenching his fists and collecting himself. “I’m in the market for a friend. You know anybody?”

“Yeah, I might know somebody,” She said, a wry smile spreading across her face. “You’re going to have to get it together, though. I have a certain reputation that won’t hold up to stammering nerds being seen in public with me.”

“Who said anything about public? My reputation among the stammering nerd community is also worth protecting.”

Beverly laughed. “You free tonight? It’s dollar margarita night again.”

“I’ll have to check my schedule,” He deadpanned, and she snorted. “Meet you at seven? You can bring the others, if you want.”

“If I’m honest, I’m a little sick of them. I’ll see you then. Will I hear about your ‘come to Jesus’ person?”

“Definitely not. I’m doing my best to forget about it.”

He got into his Volvo, turning up Jim Croce and finishing his statement to Beverly mentally with, “and failing miserably.”

Psycho Killer! Qu'est-ce que c'est?

“You can’t deny that she’s hot! The curls, the tacky, kind of suggestive outfits, she’s nice to look at!”

Will snorted, motioning to the waiter for another terrible margarita. “She published an article calling me insane, Beverly.”

“I didn’t say I like her, I’m just saying that no reasonable person could blame the people she fucks for information! That hair? I’d rat you out in a heartbeat.” Beverly laughed.

“Well, next time Freddie Lounds shows up at my house to harass me, I’ll relay your interest.”

Beverly put her straw on the table and tipped the glass directly into her mouth to get the dregs, then started on her next one. “You can’t honestly say to me that you’ve never considered it.”

“I would sooner shoot Freddie Lounds than kiss her.”

“So would I, but admit that you’ve thought about it.”

Will blinked. Had he? “I can honestly say I haven’t. Maybe it’s the fact that she’d definitely publish something immediately afterwards to rate my performance.”

Beverly giggled. “She’d be writing it from your bed the second you fell asleep.”

“God,” He said, shivering at the image. “Despite Graham’s borderline boring nature and generally underwhelming appearance, I found the most disturbing part of my time with him

was when he left in the middle to go slaughter some innocent people. Source? What's a source?"

Cackling, Beverly waved the waiter over to order an appetizer. "She doesn't care much for facts, our lovely Miss Lounds."

"That's for damn sure."

"So, Will…" Beverly began, leaning back in her seat. "What's happened with this person you've now evicted from your life? I never hear you talk about dating. Frankly, I never hear you talk."

"Oh, it wasn't someone I was dating."

"But someone you were interested in dating," She surmised, and Will flushed.

"Not in any realistic way. I'm… Me, and he's-" He stopped, embarrassed at the slip of the tongue, and glared at the empty margarita glass.

With an almost pitying expression, Beverly leaned forward and took his hand in both of hers. "It's obviously okay with me, Will. I've dipped my toe into both pools, I'm not going to judge you. You can trust me."

You can trust me, Will. He heard, in Hannibal's voice, and jerked a little, pulling his hand away. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to… Don't tell anyone, okay? I'm not really okay with it, myself."

She nodded, seeming sincere. "Just go on with what you were saying, it doesn't matter, it's fine."

"On a fundamental level, we wouldn't work. We're really different people, and I know that, but a part of me still… Thought about it. Sometimes. But it doesn't matter, because I realized he's…" Will scoffed at himself. "He was playing chess."

Beverly raised her eyebrows, disbelieving. “You’re trying to tell me that *you* were playing checkers?”

“I wasn’t even playing. I didn’t even know it was a game,” He said, feeling more than a little miserable. “Let’s talk about your relationships now.”

“Fair play. I’m trying to choose between two suitors.”

Will groaned. “*Suitors?* Who says *suitors?* ”

Laughing, she continued. “One of them, Eli, is… Kind.”

“You’ll pick the other one,” He said decisively.

“Will I?” Beverly asked, narrowing her eyes.

He sipped loudly at the bright blue poison in front of him, cringing at the sound. “If you’re talking about someone to date, and your first word is ‘kind’, you don’t like him enough. You want to, because he’s good for you and good to you and way more into you than you are into him, but you don’t. And,” well, he was speaking from experience now. “Eventually, you’ll grow to resent that. Resent that you didn’t aim higher, for someone who really gave you a thrill.” He popped a nacho into his mouth. “Tell me about the other one.”

“She’s terrifying. Mysterious and cryptic and, like… Weird. I don’t know.”

Will grinned. It was so fun to be right sometimes. “What’s her name?”

“Well, that’s the thing…” She said, and Will leaned forward, curiosity piqued. “Her

name is also Eli. “

Will blinked, then started to laugh. It was so colossally stupid a problem and yet it struck him as the funniest thing he’d ever heard. He snowballed out of control, not having seriously laughed in so long, and by the time he collected himself, there were tears in his eyes. “Eli and Eli?”

“I keep sending them messages meant for each other!” She said, laughing with him.

“What are you going to do?”

“Probably change their names to, like, Girl Eli and Boy Eli.”

Like a child, Will giggled. Actually giggled, and that made Beverly laugh more.

“You’re toasted, Graham. Stay the night at my place, it’ll be fun. It’s closer, so we can Uber.”

Will raised his eyebrows. “If I didn’t know it couldn’t be true because my name isn’t Eli, I would think you were coming on to me.”

“Luckily, your name isn’t Eli, is it? We can have a sleepover, keep drinking, and watch a movie.”

This sounded incredibly suspicious, but he had fed his dogs before he left, and it was Friday, so he could just go home and feed them in the morning. “Why?”

Beverly shrugged. “You aren’t the only one who’s been in the market for a friend.”

They paid for their respective dinners, then got an Uber to Beverly's small apartment, where a giant, black dog jumped on Will's legs immediately, so he collapsed to the ground so it could sit on him. "Is he a Newfoundland? I always wanted one," He asked between chattering with the dog and running his fingers through his soft fur.

"Yeah, his name's Walkman," She said, patting the dog on his head. "I'd tell you that you can push him off, but I know you wouldn't. Drink? I'm having a vodka soda."

"Yeah, I'll have the same," Will said distractedly, ruffling Walkman's fur and then burying his face in it. He was pulled out of his dog-therapy session by his phone blaring *Psycho Killer* . He glanced at it, blinking to make his eyes focus, then rolled his eyes.

Dr. Lecter

He laughed to himself, having forgotten his recent ringtone change, and pressed the decline button, ready to resume the conversation with the massive dog on his lap. It rang again. This time, he picked up. "What?" He snarled, too drunk to play their stupid manipulative game and too hurt to try to appear friendly.

" *Jesus* , Will," Beverly said as she entered the room, taking the phone from him. "Will's phone, this is Beverly."

"Will's phone, this is Beverly," Will repeated in a mocking voice, and Beverly kicked him and handed him his drink.

"Hey, Dr. Lecter, sorry about that. He's kind of trashed, don't take it personally."

Actually, I would prefer he take it very, very personally. Will thought, but just took a big gulp of his drink and buried his face back in Walkman's fur.

"Yeah, he was on the Ripper case today." A pause. "Um, better than usual, I'd say." Beverly's hand grabbed his curls and tipped his head up to look at her from where he was sitting on the

ground. “For an alcoholic, he’s kind of a lightweight.”

“Fuck you,” Will grumbled.

“Yeah, I’ll tell him. You, too.” She hung up the phone and put it on the coffee table, then joined him on the floor. For a moment, he could see her wanting to ask about his relationship with Hannibal, why Hannibal was checking in on him so diligently, but instead she just sighed. “Wanna watch *Ten Things I Hate About You* ?”

Oh, good, he was back on schedule! “Sounds good.”

He was asleep within ten minutes, head on Beverly’s shoulder and Walkman resting half on his lap.

Blue

Chapter Notes

The salmon-colored (whore!) shirt makes an appearance

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The drive home was both substantially better and considerably worse than his drive to the crime scene. Better because he wasn't crying around as much and feeling betrayed. Worse because he had to pull over to vomit twice.

Another tally was added in the 'worse' column when, just twenty minutes after arriving home, a knock sounded at his door. Groaning miserably, because there was only one person he knew who would come to his house unannounced. His head throbbed, he really, *really* didn't have the energy to deal with this. He thrust the door open with a grumbled, "good morning."

Hannibal appeared chipper as ever. "Good morning, Will. May I come in?"

"Must you?" Will retorted, before he could stop himself.

The psychiatrist raised his eyebrows. "Have I done something to offend you, Will?"

Uh, yeah, you fucking have, you narcissistic dick. Will sighed and stepped aside. "No, I'm sorry, of course, come in." *Keep an eye on him, Will.* "I'm extremely hungover, that's all. Kind of at that stage where I feel repulsed with myself."

He deliberately didn't mention that he had made that stage sort of a permanent residence, but he got the feeling Hannibal knew. "Yes, I figured you might be. I wanted to drop this off for

you in service of a precaution against you having to cancel tonight." With that, Hannibal handed him a white paper bag, containing a tupperware, some Aspirin, and a thermos.

God, this motherfucker was weird, wasn't he? "Thank you, Hannibal, you didn't have to do that."

Hannibal stared at him a moment, then stepped forward and pressed his cool palm to Will's forehead. Will did his best not to whimper and only half-succeeded, letting out an embarrassing sigh. "You don't feel terribly warm," The psychiatrist said, but left his hand where it was.

Will was only so strong, and he was *so* hungover and he felt too hot and nauseous and so he let himself lean a little into Dr. Lecter's cold hand. He made himself glance at Hannibal, who quickly covered an expression that Will partly wanted to call *rapture.* Will quirked an eyebrow, and Hannibal stepped away. "I'll let you rest up, Will. I still expect to see you tonight, around 7:30?"

"Sure, yeah."

With little more fanfare than that, Hannibal departed, leaving Will to examine his offering. There was a sort of meat hash that smelled delicious, some hot tea, and the bottle of Aspirin, all of which Will threw away, except for a small sample of each. He wasn't depressed enough to take something given to him by the man attempting to prolong his encephalitis.

It was probable that Hannibal had put something in some part of the food. He considered taking it into the lab that day so that he could act accordingly, but it wasn't even necessarily damning if Hannibal found out that Will hadn't eaten anything. He could just say he'd been nauseous all day and decided to wait to eat until their dinner. He'd test the samples himself in the coming week.

Will put on a Joni Mitchell album and went to sleep, setting an alarm so he wouldn't sleep through the dinner date from hell. Last time, his righteous anger had fueled him into putting forth a lot of effort in manipulating Hannibal. Now, he was just tired. Tired and battered and hurt and he felt sort of empty inside.

He reconsidered his conclusions from the day before, about punishing Hannibal, and scolded himself once he realized that he never once considered Hannibal's crimes against humanity (murder, cannibalism, corpse desecration) in his rage, only Hannibal's crimes against himself.

It was disappointing (but not surprising) to learn just how little progress he had made at understanding greater society. He only cared that Hannibal had betrayed him, had made him sick for amusement's sake, had laid foundations so thick that Will was now unmoored without them.

Will Graham had to leave.

Fuck this plan, fuck all of it. Why did it matter to him at all to determine the extent of Hannibal's apathy towards him? Was he truly so masochistic as to need to find at what point the psychiatrist's *care* for Will stopped? Why did it keep him awake, gnawing at his guts, to think that he really had only been a science project, *again* ? It shouldn't matter, that's what he was. The sooner he stopped deluding himself that Hannibal wanted him for any reason other than sideshow, *freak* value, the better.

Hannibal deserved to be punished. As far as Will knew, there was no greater punishment for him than to take away his entertainment. This would be his last supper with Hannibal. He needed no more answers to questions that would only haunt him.

Will put on an ironed, salmon-colored shirt and black trousers and steeled himself. *One last time.*

Chapter End Notes

seriously he's the most indecisive man to walk the earth and I want to point it out

"Last" Goodbye

“I was unaware you and Agent Katz were so close,” Hannibal mused, once they were sitting at the table.

Will felt a powerful stab of sadness at the thought of leaving Beverly behind, but she would be safer in his absence. “Well, who can resist dollar margarita night?” He asked, and Hannibal chuckled.

“I assume you meant that to be rhetorical,” He said. “Do you have romantic aspirations towards her?”

Fuck’s sake, does it matter? “No, it isn’t like that.” Will smiled despite himself. “Her dating stories are… Shocking, to say the least. She told me last night that she could see the appeal of Freddie Lounds.”

Even Hannibal smiled. “I find myself unable to see Miss Lounds as anything other than what she is, which is vermin.”

Snorting, Will agreed. “That’s what I said. I think she was just saying it to get a rise out of me. She’s a little like what I thought it would be like to have a sister,” He mused, staring at his… Soup? He never listened when Hannibal presented these dishes, why didn’t he listen? “I always wanted a sister.”

When Will glanced up, his breath caught in his throat.

Flayed. Hannibal looked as though Will had stripped him bare and scorned what he’d seen. He looked exactly how Will felt when he got the results of his encephalitis test--visible and humiliated. “Dr. L-” Oh, what the hell? “Hannibal, is everything all right?”

The shutters in Hannibal's eyes drew rapidly, and his face returned to its default placidity. "Of course."

Will stared at him a moment. "Do you have any siblings?" He asked, knowing that he should be afraid for his life. Vulnerable Hannibal Lecter was uncharted territory, and Will had just seen a murder scene that confirmed that emotions could lead him to kill.

A moment of silence passed, and Will saw the calculation in Hannibal's eyes. *To tell the subject something to humanize both it and myself, or to stay safe behind the veil?* "I had a sister."

The change in verb tense was possibly more painful than anything else he could have said. "Older or younger?"

A ghost of a smile blew across the cannibal's face. "Younger. Eight years younger."

I hate you. Will tried the words on in his mind, found they didn't fit. He couldn't make them fit, not right now. He looked at Hannibal, felt him getting lost somewhere deep inside his head where he was safe from this, from this conversation and from Will himself. Gently, Will redirected. "You seem like an older sibling."

Hannibal's gaze refocused, seeming interested and less volatile. "Oh? How so?"

"It's odd, the lab team and I were just talking about this. Older siblings are… Leaders. They frequently take on the role of a secondary parent, they set the bar, follow their own paths. Beverly is the oldest, too."

If Will had to describe Hannibal's expression, he would call it *reluctantly charmed.* "And you feel this describes me?"

"I think you have your own ideas and motives and other people's don't really impact you that much." He played that back in his head. "I meant for that to sound complimentary."

With a soft laugh, Hannibal nodded. “I know what you meant.” The cannibal paused, apparently considering whether to speak. “For all of the accolades your powers of perception draw, it is a completely different experience to have them focused on me.”

“Yeah, people aren’t usually big fans,” Will grumbled.

“On the contrary, Will, I meant for it to sound complimentary,” he quoted cheerfully. “Are you frequently able to divine family situations with your empathy?”

“I don’t *divine* it. I assume and sometimes I’m right,” he defended, running a hand through his curls. “Not usually. Some people fit the stereotypes well. Jack, for example, is an only child. Only thinks about his own goals. Even if the goals are selfless, he still puts his own above everyone else’s.” Will flushed, embarrassed that he had also described himself. “He’s also never learned to compromise. He sees the options as win or lose, which means he often wins. It also means, if he doesn’t win, he counts it as a complete loss and implodes.”

“I would argue *explodes* .”

Will shrugged. “Sometimes. Alana, I bet, is the youngest.”

“She is, how do you know?” Hannibal said, seeming impressed.

Why do I care so much about impressing you? “She… Requires coddling. She doesn’t do well in uncomfortable situations, she makes a judgment and sticks to it despite contradicting evidence. It’s not the mark of someone who has been a leader her whole life.”

“I was under the impression you harbored affection for her.”

Will chuckled. “I like Alana, but she is terrified of me. She’s…” *Oh, God, don’t lose it now, Will.* “She’s not the first person whose *interest* in me was similar to the way kids are *interested* in deformed animals. A science project, a…” *Please get it together.* “A freak show.”

“You think she views you as a circus act?” Hannibal asked, sounding almost genuinely concerned. *Good actor.*

“I think *you* view me as a circus act,” Will spat, then caught himself and walked it back. “You and everyone else. Everyone I’ve ever met thinks I’m a spectacle. Like animals in cages that people poke as they walk by because they want to see what will happen. Do you know-” Oh, he was raging now. “The day he asked me to work for him, Jack came into my classroom and took off my glasses with his own hands to force me to look in his eyes?”

Will was smiling. He was so *fucking* angry, so jumbled inside that it was starting to seem funny. Funnier than all of it was that he was telling Hannibal, the biggest fucking perpetrator of this crime he could imagine. He wasn’t about to blow his cover, but he needed his words to stick, for Hannibal to think on them after he was gone and know that Will’s absence was *his fucking fault* . “Do you have any idea how *humiliating* it is to be treated like that? How dehumanizing? Zeller jumps when I enter a room, like I’m that unpredictable, and *I haven’t even done anything.* You saw Freddie Lounds look at me, somewhere in the overlap of horror and intrigue. If you had seen the absolute *hunger* on Frederick Chilton’s face when he heard about what I am, the way he *begged* to test me, they act like I’m King Kong!”

“Who,” Hannibal said quietly.

Will blinked, breathing a little heavily in the face of his interrupted tirade. “What?”

“You said, ‘what you are.’ It’s ‘who’ you are.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Hannibal’s eyebrow twitched, and he looked, for all the world, genuinely distraught. “Just then. You said, ‘when he heard about *what* I am.’ You should’ve said, ‘who I am.’” Actually, Will was pretty sure that it was *whom.* Who? Whom? Impervious to Will’s grammar considerations, Hannibal plowed on. “Was that a slip of the tongue, or do you genuinely not view yourself as human?”

Oh. Talk about taking the wind out of his sails. Will deflated like a sad balloon, wanting to go home. “I don’t know,” He mumbled.

“Will, look at me, please,” Hannibal commanded, and, exhausted, Will obeyed. “It is true that you are inherently Other. But you are *better* . You’re different, have been your entire life. Not in the way that cancer cells are different from normal cells, but in the way that a lion is different from a lamb.”

Why are you saying this? To what end?

“Will,” he said once more, voice almost imploring. “Believe me.”

Will stared down at the table in front of him, a single tear falling pathetically from his face and onto the dark wood. He made himself look at Hannibal again, and quietly said, “I don’t.”

He stood from the table. “I’m sorry, I think I have to leave.”

“Convenient,” Hannibal groused. “Will, you are in no state to drive, just sit for another twenty minutes. I’ll bring out dessert. Then, if you want to leave, you can.”

No state to drive, what the hell do you care? He seethed mentally. How was he supposed to skip town now? How was he ever supposed to get that stupid, apparently *false* sincere look out of his mind, the surety in the words *you are better* ? His need for vengeance was apparently being held underwater by his need for *answers* , like a mean kid at the public pool.

He needed closure. It wasn’t enough to stop being sick and see what happened, he didn’t think he could take it any longer. He might like playing games, but Will didn’t sign up for this one. It was time for answers. Hannibal needed to worry that Will would actually die, and that wouldn’t happen with this neutered, regular departure. He sighed, steeling himself again. “No, I’m sorry, I need to leave. I’ll, um… I’ll see you Monday for therapy, okay?”

“ *Will* , I don’t think it’s wise for you to be on the road, you’re upset, you’ve been drinking-” No, he hadn’t. “It’s even snowing, I would hate for you to get hurt because I’ve made you uncomfortable.”

Ha! That was a first. “I’ll be fine. Snow’s piling up, all the more reason to get home early tonight.” He tugged his coat over his shoulders, ignoring Hannibal’s protests without much difficulty as he looked forward to the truly epic cry he could be expected to get out as soon as he *got the fuck out of here* . Will opened the door, and Hannibal reached around him and slammed it closed.

“Will, in good conscience,” Will repressed an incredulous laugh, as *if!* “I cannot let you drive right now.”

In an act of cruelty new even for him, Will put his hand on Hannibal’s bicep, thumb gently making circles on the soft material there. *Lures can look like something other than food* , he thought again. Hannibal’s breath stuttered minutely, and Will sighed. “Thank you, Hannibal. Not just for dinner. For everything.”

And he darted out the door.

Not five minutes into the drive, he received a text.

Dr. Lecter: *You will text me when you’ve arrived home safely.*

Will rolled his eyes. “Bite me.” He turned up Jeff Buckley and thundered away.

Will Graham Read Gone Girl and It Stuck with Him

Chapter Notes

TW: Contemplating stabbing. Vividly.

Monday couldn't come soon enough.

The thing about a plan specifically designed to elicit a negative emotion from Hannibal Lecter was that it also meant Will had to plan for his death. Disguising it as a drunk text, Will asked Beverly to find good homes for all of his dogs 'if anything ever happened to him.' When she asked for further clarification, he made up an excuse that he had watched *Titanic* and it made him start to think about plans after death. He also gave her blanket permission to publish whatever she wanted about him, true or not, in the event of his passing, as long as she embellished to make him sound kind of badass.

He set up a small camera in the upper corner of his house, facing the chair at his desk. Then, he got to work on the note. *God,* the note was so dramatic, he felt like he was in *Gone Girl* .

At the top, he had deliberately written 'Dear Hannibal', then drawn a line through it so that it could still easily be read, but would look like he changed his mind about to whom the letter was addressed.

To whoever should find this,

This is for the best, I promise. The most effective way I could protect the world was to

evict myself from it. Do not search for me, the decision to end it has been made for

some time.

I can't tell if I'm afraid. I am too assured by the certainty that this is the right thing. I would like to be buried somewhere on my property, if possible. Please find good homes for my dogs, they know I am sorry to have failed them.

Almost as sorry as I am to have failed you.

To anyone who is caused pain by this decision, know that it is for the best.

-Will Graham

Will hoped Hannibal would buy it. He worked on it for ages, making sure to let teardrops fall onto it and smudge the ink in places. It was difficult, though, to know what a realistically suicidal person would say. Will wasn't suicidal, even though he was taking actions that he knew might lead to his death, it wasn't because he wanted to die. He just wanted answers more than he wanted to live.

He dropped the dogs off Sunday night at a nearby kennel, hugging and kissing each of them, then leaving Beverly's number with the man at the front desk with instructions to call her if he didn't turn up by Tuesday at eleven.

If Hannibal killed him, he certainly would appreciate Will's dedication to taking seemingly suicidal measures. He stopped at a restaurant Sunday night, alone, and wolfed down greasy, heart-stopping food, then went home.

He spent Monday in the barn, with his phone, connected to the camera in the house. It was a fairly long and boring day, but he had stocked up on potato chips to eat while he monitored the house camera.

Finally, *fucking finally* , he heard the Bentley pull up. From his phone, he heard Hannibal knocking on the door.

"Will? Your car is here. Please open the door, or I'll be forced to open it myself." Only a few seconds passed before Hannibal knelt at the front of the door, wriggling a key out from under a rock and pushing it open.

Will could see it in his face, registering the lack of barking. His voice still sounded calm as he called out for the profiler, opening every door in the house. Brows furrowed, he turned towards the kitchen and spotted the note on the desk.

Wow, he was kind of a fast reader. It was only some fifteen seconds before Will saw Hannibal's face change completely. It was the most clearly Will had ever been able to read him. *Agony.* His ironfisted control appeared to be escaping him as he tore through the old drafts of the note on the table, which Will had ever-so-helpfully backdated throughout the preceding two weeks.

He was muttering to himself in a language Will didn't know, right hand occasionally rising to bat a tear from his face. He made to call… Someone, Will couldn't tell, but it didn't go through. Nobody's calls ever came through from Wolf Trap unless they had Will's 'bad-reception-specific' phone plan. Advantage of rural society, in Will's opinion.

Time for Phase Two.

Leisurely, Will exited the barn and strolled over to the (still open) entrance to his house. Hannibal was so distraught that he didn't seem to notice Will even when he was only some six feet away from him. Keeping his face carefully blank, Will cleared his throat, making the cannibal whirl around, brandishing a hunting knife from his pocket on the way. "Hey," He said, feeling more than a little awkward. *Should have written a script.*

Knife pointed at Will's stomach, Hannibal approached him slowly, turning them so that Will's back was to the wall. "Defeats the point a little if you kill me now, doesn't it, Dr. Lecter?" Will asked. Hannibal said nothing, and Will huffed a laugh. "So many words so much of the time, now you're quiet." He unbuttoned his shirt, grabbing Hannibal's knife-wielding arm and pulling him closer, so the tip of the blade was pressed against his stomach, where he had been hurting for *so long* , now. "You gonna gut me, Hannibal? Do it, come on. Sink the knife in, come on." His eyes were watering and his throat was tight, but he had to do this, didn't he?

Hannibal's expression was completely blank, staring down at where the knife was touching Will, still not hard enough to draw blood.

"Come *on,* Hannibal. Gut me. Take my fucking life. *Kill me,* Hannibal, you might as well. You might as well have just done it two *fucking* weeks ago."

The psychiatrist's eyes flicked up, staring at Will's face now, which only served to enrage him more.

“Just *do it* , make the flesh reflect the soul. You fucking traitor, finish the *fucking* job!” Will was crying, now, wishing that this bastard would just get it over with. He was losing it, begging, tears streaming down his face. There was no way being stabbed could hurt nearly as badly as he hurt right now. “Come on, hurt me one last time. It’s fun, right? Free entertainment! Destroy someone who trusts you, who needs you, who *fucking loves you* , right? *Finish the job* .”

Something in Hannibal’s expression flickered, and Will felt for sure that the blade would sink into his abdomen, but instead it clattered to the floor, and Hannibal’s arms wound around him instead. A vice grip around his waist, face tucked into Will’s shoulder.

Unexpected.

Will stayed almost completely still, shocked, until he eventually let his arms settle against Hannibal, hands resting on his biceps. Hannibal would only shift to tighten his grip on the profiler and occasionally run a hand up his spine.

Finally, Hannibal pulled his hands away, only to rest one of them on Will’s cheek and press a kiss to his forehead and then put pressure on it with his own. Will did everything he could to hide the stuttering of his breath.

“You aren’t going to kill me?” Will said, voice shaky and quiet.

Hannibal shook his head, eyes closed.

“Are you angry with me?”

The cannibal sighed, and Will could taste his breath. The taste was one of tears and terror, and he almost felt sorry. “Almost irretrievably so. Am I right to assume you feel similarly?”

Will huffed a laugh. “Yeah.”

Opening his eyes, Hannibal pulled away slightly, hands carding through Will's curls in a truly jarring display of affection. "Do you hate me, Will?"

I hate you. He tried the words on once more and found he didn't even recognize them. "I want to. I really, really want to."

"A feeling I am quite familiar with." Hannibal gently patted his cheek, and Will leaned in to it once more.

A few moments of silence passed, and Will finally sighed. "Do you want a coffee?"

What Goes on an Altar?

The silence as the coffee brewed was pretty awkward, in Will's opinion. It was only exacerbated by Hannibal leaving the kitchen to pick up his discarded knife and put it back in his pocket.

Steaming mugs in hand, they sat facing each other on the couch. The game of chicken to see who would break the silence was almost funny, but not quite. "You can go first," Will eventually grumbled, and Hannibal huffed a laugh.

"What, exactly, are you angry about?" The psychiatrist asked.

That you kill people . No, not that. *That you let my mind burn.* He didn't *like* that, but it wasn't why he was angry.

His mind couldn't settle on a response in time, so Hannibal spoke again. "You called me a traitor. How do you feel I've betrayed you?"

"You… Tricked me," Will said, sounding, even to himself, quite pathetic. "You made me think that you… Cared for me. You convinced me that I was your friend, that I wasn't completely, entirely alone in the world, and it was a *lie.* I thought…" He was embarrassed to find his voice tearful, so he kept his face downward, not letting Hannibal see. "I thought you were my friend. I thought, *finally* , someone who can see me, and doesn't just see an experiment or a freak. And it was a trick."

Hannibal inhaled sharply, but Will ignored him. "I would have forgiven you, you know. For being a serial killer. I would have done *anything* not to lose the first person who saw me. But you were just pretending. The whole time, you were playing a game, and I wasn't even your opponent, I was just a fucking… Bishop." He shook his head, miserable. " *That's* why I'm angry. You made a fool of me, you made me think I might not be the only person out here, *like me* , and you used that for *fucking entertainment* ."

When Will looked up, Hannibal looked *pained* . “You’re wrong,” He said, and Will laughed meanly. “I was curious, I wanted to see what you would do, not because I think of you as some circus clown or gamepiece, but because your mind is *beautiful* . You insist on limiting it with things you don’t believe in. The encephalitis was allowing your mind to circumvent those barriers. I would not have let it progress to a lethal level.

“Will, what you’re describing, being *seen* , becoming aware that someone else can see you, it’s what I’ve been experiencing since meeting you. I wanted you to reach your full potential, but I did *not* see you as a fool, certainly not a freak. When we spoke Saturday night, I realized just how much pain a misconception of this nature would cause you.”

“I don’t believe you,” Will said, scowling.

“I will be as honest as I possibly can, listen to me,” Hannibal commanded. “I do not regret that I didn’t tell you that you have encephalitis. I certainly don’t regret killing people, and I don’t regret doing everything in my power to encourage you to be vulnerable with me.”

“Really stellar apology, Hannibal, thanks.”

“Be quiet,” He said sharply, more stern than Will had ever heard him. “But, for making you feel that my affection for you was based only in deceit? I am truly, deeply sorry. I am… Fonder of you than you can possibly fathom. When I said that I cared for you, I was not lying.”

Will rolled his lips between his teeth. “‘I don’t care about the lives you save, I care about your life.’ That’s what you said to me. And every time I started to feel myself thaw towards you in the last few weeks, I reminded myself of those words, and the fact that they weren’t true.”

“They *were,*” Hannibal hissed.

Will scoffed, doing everything he could to stop himself from crying. He stood to pace, leaving Hannibal sitting on the couch. “Why should I believe you?” He managed, voice cracking.

“Do you want to?”

The profiler pressed the heels of his hands into his eye sockets until he saw stars. When he took them away, his eyes were dry, and his voice was numb when he replied, “what?”

“Do you want to believe me? That I, someone whom I assume your pseudo-morals would rebuff, could sincerely care for you?”

“If you aren’t lying, which is implausible, let me be the first to tell you that you’ve got a demented way of caring for people,” Will grumbled, and Hannibal chuckled.

“Yes, I’m aware. So, do you?”

In all honesty, Will had no fucking clue. He wasn’t even sure what Hannibal was asking, did he want to believe him, did he believe him? There were too many questions, and he had answers to none of them. “What did it mean? The tableau.”

“I want to know what you thought it meant.”

Will groaned, miserable. “What, seriously?” Hannibal said nothing, so he continued. “You felt visible. Exposed, even. Like I had seen too much. I had offered up something, but you felt like you were substantially more vulnerable.”

Hannibal’s head was cocked sideways, looking not unlike Winston. “That’s what you gathered?”

“Yes. Why? Is that wrong?” There was no way he was wrong.

“You are blinded by self-loathing,” The psychiatrist said, and Will laughed despite himself. “You’re half right, you’ve discerned the less obvious meaning. Your esteemed colleagues,” *esteemed colleagues* was said with what could only be called mockery, “what did they think?”

Will sighed, staring at the wall and shaking his head, feeling drained. “They misinterpreted it, said, and I quote, ‘The Ripper is in love.’ Fun for dramatic effect, but…” He flapped his hand uselessly at the space between them. “Obviously not true.”

When he managed to force himself to look back at Hannibal, the psychiatrist was staring at him pensively, as if unsure how to proceed. “What did you say? To their conclusions.”

“I-... I don’t know, something like, ‘no’, because… I mean, they thought that it was representative of offering up your own heart, putting it on the altar as an offering to someone.”

“But?”

Will was getting sick of this conversation. “But it can’t be, because it was someone else’s heart.” He felt tired and humiliated, for some reason, and also like he had done a bad job interpreting a crime scene, which was supposed to be his one use in the world. “I don’t understand what I missed. The obvious meaning, as you called it.”

Hannibal nodded slowly. “Did it occur to any of you that the heart on the altar was not an offering?”

“No,” Will snarked. “Because that’s not how altars work. What was it, a decoration?”

The cannibal’s expression was unimpressed, whether by Will’s snark or apparently lacking mental prowess was unclear. “Your blindness is either deliberate or horrifying.”

Will groaned, pacing more. *What goes on an altar?* For a few seconds, he could only think of those words, so he took a deep breath and forced himself to focus, picturing every religious scene he'd ever witnessed. On the altar was almost always an offering, it had to be an offering. Except-

"Have you found it, Will?" Hannibal asked, sounding almost vulnerable.

"What I have found cannot be correct," Will murmured, and the psychiatrist raised his eyebrows. "A graven image? An effigy?"

Hannibal looked proud.

Will stared at him, feeling the realization and finding it harrowing. "The heart wasn't the offering," he said slowly, almost timidly. "The heart was the deity."

Mutual Assured Destruction: Part I

“I don’t understand,” Will admitted, which was only half-true. He was fairly sure he understood, he just wasn’t sure he believed it.

“Do you want to?”

“Stop *fucking* asking me that,” Will hissed. He considered defending himself, saying that he wasn’t some fair maiden in a high tower hiding from the truth, but Hannibal knew that. He thought about vulnerability, saying what he thought, which was *please stop playing with me* , but he couldn’t relinquish what little control he had managed to wrest back. He decided on a different form of honesty. “I understand, I just *don’t believe you.* ”

Hannibal nodded, standing himself and ambling to the desk where the fake suicide note sat. “And I don’t know how to convince you.”

Several moments of silence passed, a caesura in this symphony of disaster. “Will you say it?” Will asked, sounding pitiful, even to himself.

There was a long pause, and Will made himself meet Hannibal’s eyes, as open as he’d ever seen them. For the first time, he could feel Hannibal the way he felt everyone else. The killer took a deep breath, then quietly, almost childlike, said, “I love you, Will.”

It *hurt* . Felt like running frostbitten hands under cold water, like steak dinner after starving for months, like singing after being mute for years. There was an undercurrent of terror that the water was sulfuric, that the dinner was poisonous, that the singing would alert some dark predator of his location. Flayed and effusive, indeed, but also terrified. And terrified that there was something in the world that could make him terrified.

Like approaching a wild animal, Will took slow, anodyne steps until he was within arms’ reach of the Ripper, fully aware of the knife in his own pocket and the one in Hannibal’s. As an American, though, Will was easily mollified by the concept of Mutual Assured Destruction. “Hannibal,” he said quietly, and it felt good in his mouth. He pressed his right hand to Hannibal’s cheek, the psychiatrist’s breath stuttering slightly. Briefly, it crossed his

mind to stab him, to carve into his stomach the way he was sure Hannibal was fantasizing about doing to him.

Instead, Will wrapped his arms around Hannibal's shoulders, carding his fingers through his hair. Raptured, Hannibal's hands clenched into the baggy t-shirt material at his sides, and he pressed their temples together.

The blaring of Van Morrison's *Cleaning Windows* was so transparently out of place, Will thought briefly that he was having a relapse until he realized it was his phone ringing.

"Ignore it," Hannibal growled.

"It's my Jack ringtone," Will grumbled back, wriggling out of the embrace and doing his best to ignore Hannibal's sigh. "Hello?"

"Hey, Will, I need you in Baltimore STAT. "

Groaning to himself, Will went to his bedroom to get real clothes to change into. "Why?"

" *Another Ripper murder last night.* "

Will pivoted, staring at Hannibal, who was doing a passable job at acting like he didn't know what this call was about. "Another Ripper murder?" He repeated, and the psychiatrist blinked innocently.

" *Yeah, I know. That's what Z and Price think, anyway."*

"Beverly?"

" *Told me not to bother her on days when she's not in the lab."*

“I would also like that deal, if it matters.”

“ *It doesn’t,”* Jack said blandly, and Will grumbled. “ *What time can you be in Baltimore?* ”

“Text me the address and give me an hour and a half.”

Wordlessly, Jack hung up. Will turned his gaze to Hannibal. “Another Ripper murder?”

“Shocking, he must be very busy,” The killer in question said, looking only politely interested. “Is Jack always so brusque in his interactions with you?”

Will rolled his eyes, walking to and digging through his drawer to find an appropriately ill-fitting flannel and iller-fitting jeans. “Why? Should he watch his back?”

“Your profile of the Ripper dictates a distaste for rude behavior, I’m only wondering what would happen if he encountered Jack Crawford’s particular brand of brevity,” Hannibal said, then his phone rang as well, a default tone. “Hello, this is Dr. Lecter.”

Will, in a high-pitched voice, repeated. “Hello, this is Dr. Lecter.” This elicited a rather chilling scowl from his psychiatrist, and Will put his hands up in a surrender motion.

“Yes, I’d be happy to come keep an eye on Will,” Hannibal said, and Will made a face.

Jack was much more polite in his farewell to Hannibal, Will noticed, which was unsurprising but irksome. “Is it fun for you, *Dr. Lecter* , to show up to your own crime scenes and listen to people spinning their wheels?” He thought of the times he had called the Ripper murders elegant and artistic in Hannibal’s presence and blushed.

“I’m quite sure I don’t know what you’re talking about, Will,” The Ripper said, a fond expression on his face as he fixed where Will had misbuttoned his flannel towards the bottom. “Would you like to ride with me?”

Not particularly, how will I have time to brood and sulk? “Sure.”

“Great. I’ll warm up the car.”

The vulnerable Hannibal of ten minutes ago had disappeared, replaced now by his usual suave confidence. Will was both relieved and disappointed at the exchange.

When he sank into the passenger seat of the delightfully toasty car, he felt his usual urge to go to sleep rise up. Unfortunately, Hannibal seemed interested in chatting some more. “You have specified ringtones for everyone in your contacts?”

Oh, God. “Not everyone, just the people who call me the most.”

“Why?”

“Because I find it funny.”

Hannibal smiled. “I’m unfamiliar with the song that you have assigned to Jack.”

“What, *you* don’t listen to Van Morrison? Color me surprised,” Will snarked, which Hannibal primly ignored. “It’s about having a boring, soul-sucking job that has eaten your entire life.”

“Fitting,” Hannibal said. “What is mine?”

Will cringed. “I’d rather not say.”

“When did you set it?”

Oh, this was far, far worse. “Until quite recently, it was *Hey You* by Pink Floyd. Which you’ve never heard.”

“But you’ve changed it.”

Please, God, if you’re out there, and you can find it in your heart to do something for me, do not make me have to reveal this song. “Yeah, ha. Anyway, what’s your ringtone?”

Hannibal didn’t say anything, and Will briefly thought he was in the clear, until the psychiatrist pressed a button on his steering wheel and said, “Call Will Graham.”

Thanks, God. Thanks so much. Will fumbled to get his phone out of his pocket, but not before it blared, “ *Psycho killer, quest-ce que ce? Fa fa-”* He shut it off, but the damage was done.

There was a long, suffocating moment of silence, then Will spoke. “You have to admit it’s a little funny.”

“Your mind,” Hannibal began, failing to completely bite back a smile. “Is both incredibly, gorgeously complex and shockingly simple.”

“Maybe I’ll change it again.”

Hannibal raised his eyebrows. “To what, exactly?”

“Well, there’s this song called *You Knew I Had Encephalitis* , I think it would really suit you,” Will said, staring out the window so that Hannibal couldn’t see his expression. When he turned, the psychiatrist looked… Concerned. “What, too soon?”

“Your penchant for using humor as a defense mechanism becomes more evident by the minute,” Hannibal said slowly. “May I ask how you found out?”

“About having encephalitis or about my closest friendship being a lie?”

Hannibal scowled, and Will could read in his face the feeling that this was going to be a long car ride. “I will not continue to repeat myself. My friendship with you was genuine.”

“ *Was* ?” Will asked, faux-pitiful, and Hannibal’s eye twitched.

“You usually sleep during these car rides, are you feeling tired? In need of a nap, perhaps?”

Yes. “Actually, I’m wide awake,” He said, feeling quite victorious. Unfortunately, his body betrayed him with a massive yawn, enough to make his eyes water. When he looked back to Hannibal, the other man’s face contained only fondness.

“How have you been sleeping?”

Will smiled ruefully. “Still badly. That, apparently, wasn’t part of the encephalitis. *Which* I learned about from an MRI that I got during my ‘trip home’.”

“Encephalitis would not have shown up on a normal MRI unless it was a specifically diagnostic one. Plus, your chart was online, showing an MRI that had already been done.” Hannibal parried.

“Yeah, I told them that the physician who did that was struck off for malpractice and to run the same kind that he did and anything else they could think of. That, combined with my *many, obvious* symptoms, led them to search for encephalitis.” The hurt feeling was back. “Which is deadly.”

Hannibal shook his head. “All illnesses are deadly if left untreated. I was monitoring your condition very closely, it’s why I was so concerned for your absence. A ruse I must commend, might I add.”

You have no idea how much detail went into that plan. Will thought, but wanted to keep Hannibal unaware of any tricks in case he needed to do it again. “Thank you,” he grumbled instead. The hurt was back, and the feeling of humiliation and general misery. Hannibal inhaled as if to speak again, but Will cut him off. “I am going to take a nap, actually. Wake me when we get there.”

“This is one of your less convincing attempts at avoidance.”

“Stop, I’m sleeping.”

Everclear and Everclear-er

A woman in a petrified sheet sat at the feet of a weeping willow tree in a bed of white lilies. Her head was tilted back, mouth agape, and eyes closed. Through her abdomen was a gold arrow, and Will understood immediately.

The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa , a baroque sculpture which sat in a church in Rome. The original sculpture depicted a woman, St. Teresa, prostrated at the foot of an angel who wielded an arrow, clearly about to stab her. It was famous for its message that being pierced (by God, in her case) warranted euphoria. The arrow, notoriously, was pointed not to her heart but to her abdomen, where the 'soul' was thought to reside.

He met Hannibal's eyes, feeling exposed. The killer was looking at him with a sort of rapturous unease, as this was the test. Would Will keep leading them to the Ripper (whom they would never discover) in order to appease the morals he desperately clung to, or would he betray Hannibal as he had been betrayed?

It wasn't a question of law. Hannibal didn't care if the law was against him, he was clever enough to never leave evidence and had seemingly no respect for a social contract. It was a question of Will's acceptance, which putatively did matter to Hannibal.

"Well?" Jack demanded.

"Well, what?"

"What's he doing? What's he thinking? Who is he, can we find him? What the hell do you mean, 'well, what?'"

Will felt Hannibal bristle at his side, but spoke anyway. "It's the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa.* Or, rather, half of it."

“What does it *mean?* You’re a profiler, Will, not an art appraiser. Was this someone especially rude to him?”

Hannibal took a slight step forward, now situated between Will and Jack. “I would suggest that the Ripper would likely take issue with your current behavior towards your employee, Jack.”

Jack looked murderous, but Hannibal *was* murderous. Sensing that, Jack faltered. “I’m just eager for any insight Will may have.”

Hannibal hummed, seeming good-natured once again.

Uncomfortable, Will spoke up. “Teresa is the patron saint of flowers and missions, and, as a result, is often regarded as the patron of Evangelicalism. And the white lily is the national flower of Italy, where this sculpture is.” This was some bullshit if ever Will had bullshitted. He cleared his throat, doing his absolute best to sound like he wasn’t lying through his teeth. “Jack, I have to tell you something.”

He felt Hannibal’s gaze on him, more interested than afraid.

“What?” Jack said, voice almost cloyingly neutral.

“I’ve been looking into some old cases, you know. Trying to put some things together. And I think that who we’ve been labeling as the Chesapeake Ripper also has another title.”

“Go on.”

Will cleared his throat again. “There was a killer in Italy, they called him *Il Mostro.* ” He heard Hannibal’s breath catch in his throat, surprised. Inwardly, Will preened at regaining his adulation. “I think he’s the Ripper, too. And maybe other killers we’ve sought, I don’t know. But based on this… The patron saint of flowers in a statue in Italy, sitting in a bed of Italy’s

national flower, based on a statue of a woman known for traveling to spread her faith…" He trailed off, deliberately leading Jack where he wanted him.

"You think he's going back to Italy," Jack said, seeming awed.

Will sighed in false self-consciousness. "I know it seems outlandish, I know that," *because it is.* "Just… Look over the Il Mostro cases and see what you think."

Jack nodded, eager, as ever, for there to be an end in sight to this case. "If that's true, flight monitoring will make it much easier to narrow down a pool of suspects."

Will managed to wrap things up with Jack without blowing his stupid cover story, then collapsed into Hannibal's car next to him.

"What's your real conclusion, Agent Graham?"

"Not an agent," He grumbled. "It isn't about the flowers, it's about the statue. Delighting in the pain of salvation, of the reveal of the soul."

"You did not relay this meaning to Jack."

Will blinked out the window, clenching fists then shaking out his hands again. "Okay?"

"Why not?"

"Maybe I want Jack to have an excuse to vacation to Italy," Will murmured. He looked back to Hannibal. "Don't kill Jack, okay?"

"I'm not sure what you're talking about."

“Stop it.”

Hannibal sighed. “Will, if I were the Ripper, I would ask you if you thought it was smart or just for you to be dictating who could be killed. Doesn’t he already have criteria? If Jack meets said criteria, that seems like reason enough.”

“Look, I’m not saying you can’t torment him a little,” Will conceded. “I know that now that I don’t have encephalitis you’ve got a lot of excess torture energy that you need to expend, and I’d prefer you not use me to do it. But don’t kill him.”

“The Ripper, we can assume, will do nothing beyond the scope of what Jack deserves.”

Will harrumphed and pulled out his phone, typing loudly.

“It’s rude to text in the middle of a conversation with someone.”

“I’m not texting,” He said, knowing this would irritate Hannibal immensely.

“What are you doing, then?”

“Changing your ringtone.”

The psychiatrist’s eye twitched. “To what?”

Hannibal had severely underestimated just how annoying Will could be. “Don’t worry about it, you wouldn’t know it.” He bit back a smile. “It’s a CeeLo Green song.”

“What’s the title?”

“I’d rather not say.”

“Will, don’t make me call your phone.”

“Well,” he was barely repressing laughter, “since you’re demanding to know, it’s called *Fuck You.* ”

“Despite the distance being the same, these car rides are each longer than the last,” Hannibal replied primly. “You haven’t answered my question. Why didn’t you tell Jack?”

“Why should I tell him something I have no evidence for?”

“So, that’s your reason? Lack of evidence?” Hannibal asked, sounding almost disappointed.

“It’s a reason.”

Hannibal perked up a bit at that. “But not the main one?”

“What are you hoping to hear, Hannibal?” Will asked, feeling exhausted.

“By your account, I betrayed you. I want to know why you didn’t do the same to me.”

Will shook his head, staring out the window. “You already know why. I’m not going to say it.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t think you deserve to hear it,” He said, voice cold.

It should feel better, depriving Hannibal of what he wanted to hear. It should feel like victory, like righteousness. And it did, in part, feel like winning, but it didn’t feel good. He couldn’t stop reliving the Ripper’s feelings, at the murder and in their conversation before; the pain of loving, the knowing submission to that pain.

It felt like guilt. Like beating a dumb kid at poker. Hannibal was inexperienced in loving someone, was possibly not equipped to love someone. There was no victory in besting him at a game the killer was begging to play, knowing he’d lose.

“Will you ever forgive me?” Hannibal asked neutrally, interrupting Will’s musings.

You fucking dick, I already have . Will started to say another cutting remark, but made the mistake of looking over at the other man, whose expression was almost dolefully sincere. The profiler changed tactics. “It’s not a matter of forgiving you. It’s a matter of forgiving myself for my feelings about you.”

Hannibal’s voice was quiet and deceptively calm when he asked, “Do you believe me yet?”

“I don’t know. Maybe,” Will said, shaking out his hands. He cracked his neck both ways, then leaned back in the passenger seat.

“Are you hungry?” Hannibal asked.

“No," His stomach growled. *Traitor* . “Why, did somebody piss you off?”

“It’s getting late,” Hannibal plowed on, “I’d love to have you for dinner.”

Will rolled his eyes, scoffing to cover a laugh. “How many times have you used that line?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“Was I right?” Will asked, remembering his speech to Jack earlier. “You’re also Il Mostro, right?”

“While I don’t know what *I’ve* got to do with this, your conclusions that the Chesapeake Ripper is also Il Mostro seem sound. Dinner?”

“Sure, whatever,” He grumbled, only partly satisfied. “How old were you when you killed for the first time?”

“I’ve never killed anyone,” Hannibal began, and Will sighed. “But I would suggest that the Chesapeake Ripper and all of his iterations likely first took a life at age thirteen.”

“Jesus,” Will said, suddenly even more interested. “In Italy?”

Hannibal’s expression was rapidly closing off, and, despite his professing to hate the man, Will didn’t want those walls rebuilt. “No,” The cannibal blankly stated. *No, come on, just when we were getting somewhere.* An image of a young Hannibal appeared in his head; dark, wary eyes and a serious sort of expression. The affection Will had been desperately pushing underwater managed to resurface, taking a gasping breath that lingered in his lungs.

“The first person I killed was Hobbs,” Will said, a passable attempt at damage control. Then, knowing it would pique Hannibal’s interest, said, “directly, anyways.”

Maroon eyes glanced at Will, intrigued, then flicked back to the road. “Directly?”

“Yeah, I shot Hobbs.” Deliberately obtuse, to force Hannibal to re-engage.

It worked. “Yes, Will, I am familiar with this. Who was on the receiving end of your more indirect violence?”

Victory, again. Oh, Hannibal was going to love this. “My father.”

Hannibal’s stare, though fixed on the road, was *starving* . “And what age were you, then?” If a mind could drool, Hannibal’s would be doing it.

“Seventeen.”

“How did you do it?” The cannibal was making a valiant effort to sound normal, but Will could hear the quivering excitement in his voice, the thrill of being allowed to know the only person who knew him.

“Well, I didn’t really *do* anything. I had warned him a few times to stop drinking so heavily, that he was going to hurt someone.”

“Other than you, you mean?” Hannibal interjected, and Will rolled his eyes.

“Not the point. Anyways, I was right. He came home too wasted and hit our neighbors’ kid with a pickup truck. She was only seven. I knew the kid, too; she was in this thing called *Adventure Camp* , and I was a counselor there.” Despite himself, he smiled. “At the bugs booth. She loved them, held a hissing cockroach, even. Her name was Maria. And my father crushed her because he was plastered on a Tuesday night.”

Will was fully aware that he was breaking his promise to himself to be less vulnerable with Hannibal, but the burn in his lungs was easing as he talked, so he continued. “Wednesday nights, my father would have his buddies over for poker night. I *hated* poker night. After poker night, my father would finish whatever booze was leftover from his stupid friends. The thoroughness with which he completed this task varied based on his mood. So, that day, I went to the liquor store, and I bought…” He laughed. “Do you know what Everclear 190 is?”

“I do not,” Hannibal said, speaking softly, as if any disturbance would make Will change his mind about this story.

“Okay, well, Everclear is this spirit that’s supposed to be great for mixing drinks because it’s so strong and it tastes just like vodka. Everclear 190 is 95 percent, it’s illegal in fourteen states. Luckily for me, Louisiana isn’t among them. I bought it and stashed it in my backpack, and then I spent all day antagonizing him. Acting like I didn’t know what happened to Maria, acting…” *Effeminate.* “Acting the way he hated me to act. I broke a plate, I sang songs that he considered ‘sinful’, I generally made his day miserable.”

“And yours, I’d imagine.”

“Not so, Dr. Lecter,” Will said, a demented sort of smile on his face. “When his poker buddies left, I refilled all of their glasses while my father was distracted, with only this Everclear 190. And every time he looked away, I would helpfully refill the glasses again. And my father was so intent on getting drunk enough to forget that I existed, he didn’t realize that what he was drinking was very much not the usual twenty percent Shitty K vodka, but a glorified cleaning product. And when I saw him passed out on the floor, smart enough to lie on his side, I helpfully laid him on his back, so he could sleep better. Then I went to bed. And when I woke up, justice had been restored.”

When he looked at Hannibal, the other man was breathless. His eyes were hooded, and Will knew the killer was seeing this scene from Will’s past with the same clarity that Will had seen Hannibal’s. He inhaled, almost managing to keep his breath from shaking, then spoke. “I am surprised you demonstrated so little faith in the justice system, considering you would later become a police officer.”

“I became a police officer to offset all the shit police officers,” Will grumbled. “As I’m sure you know, Dr. Inheritance, money can buy out justice any day, especially in the south. My father wasn’t rich, but he was influential in the town, and Maria’s family was not. There would be no justice unless I made it. I became a cop with the intent to stay impossible to buy out, which I did. I just remain unsatisfied with the so-called ‘justice’ I was being forced to uphold. I mean, everyone’s heard that story. *Couldn’t pull the trigger* , that’s what Jack says. Frequently and at impressive volumes.”

“But you can pull the trigger. Ten times, in fact,” Hannibal countered.

“Yes. What nobody seems to understand is that I wasn’t convinced that those people

deserved to die, so I didn’t think it was right to mete out justice just because some guy on a walkie-talkie told me to.” He cracked his neck again as they pulled into Hannibal’s driveway. “It wasn’t about *ability,* or freezing in the face of danger, it’s about being unwilling to use a position of power over someone in an irreversible way when I don’t think they deserve it.”

“You worked on homicide, did you not? Do you believe some of these people did not deserve death?”

“I think we both know there are justifiable homicides, Dr. Lecter. Some people just need to die. It would be hypocritical of me to have intervened after what I did.”

The psychiatrist put the car in park, then turned to look at Will. After a moment, he took Will’s closer hand in both of his. “You are more incredible than I could even fathom, Will.”

Will stared, overwhelmed by the compliment and the touch and the feeling of being *seen* . Hannibal just patted his hand, then got out of the car.

Even Cleaner Windows

Hannibal presented the dish they were supposed to eat for dinner with the usual fanfare. Unfortunately, after a long and emotionally trying day, Will was not his usual raving audience member. He finished half the food extremely slowly before Hannibal sighed and took the plate from him mid-bite.

“What are you doing? I was eating.”

“Hardly. More accurately, you’re resisting sleep and doing a terrible job at it,” Hannibal said, cleaning the table.

“I should go home…” Will mumbled, standing and swaying slightly.

“As much as I hate reliving this situation, I would really feel more comfortable if you stayed.”

Will looked up into Hannibal’s dark eyes. He didn’t trust Hannibal, that was true, but he believed that Hannibal badly craved his friendship, so that would hopefully stave off any nefarious manipulations. And he was *so* tired, and this house smelled safe and familiar. “Okay.”

Hannibal’s delight at his acquiescence was palpable, and Will forgot to stop himself from finding it endearing. “Good. I’ll gather you some sleeping clothes and prepare the guest room.”

Inwardly, Will groaned. He wanted to be held, wanted to curl up to Hannibal and try to convince himself that any of this was real. Alas, it was neither safe nor on offer, so he settled for taking the clothes that Hannibal brought him and following him placidly into the guest room, where he was left to his ‘privacy’ while Hannibal went to get him some water.

The psychiatrist had given him a plain, soft, white t-shirt, a burnt orange sweater, and some flannel pants that were much nicer than anything Will owned. To be fair, Will was already wearing a plain white t-shirt under his own flannel shirt, but allowed himself the luxury of changing into Hannibal's. He was far too hot a sleeper for a sweater or flannel pants, so he lay in Hannibal's t-shirt and his own boxers and laid the sweater on the pillow next to him. This way, he could subtly press his nose to it without being caught in the act.

He heard Hannibal coming and, possessed by instincts that frequently controlled him as a child, feigned sleep. The cannibal walked quietly into the room and sat next to Will's head on the bed, gently carding fingers through his curls. He stood to leave, and Will felt him hesitate, then detected a featherlight press of lips to his forehead.

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Will woke up from a complete night's sleep for the first time in conscious memory. It was so unusual a sensation that it was unsettling. He sat up in the bed, which was far nicer than anything he'd had cause to sleep in before, and ran his fingers through his hair. The air smelled of breakfast, a luxury Will usually didn't allow himself. He jerked on his wrinkled jeans and tugged his flannel over Hannibal's shirt, then bumbled sleepily down the stairs.

"Good morning, Will. Coffee?" The killer asked, nodding toward the mission control center he called a coffee machine.

Will nodded wordlessly, looking around the kitchen. "How long have you been awake?"

"Almost two hours." He passed the profiler a mug. "I've made breakfast--crepes, sausage hash, and eggs Florentine. Please, have a seat."

When presented with his fanciful plate, Will looked down at it with amusement and poked at his sausage. "Who's this?"

"I don't concern myself with the names pigs call themselves."

Will took a pointed bite of the sausage, which left Hannibal staring at him with adoration. “What time is it?”

“A little after ten.”

Will’s eyes widened. “ *Shit.* ” He patted his pockets frantically.

“What?”

“My dogs, I said I’d call or come by before eleven and if not-...”

Hannibal raised his eyebrows. “A contingency plan?”

“Yeah, well, I was aware of the risks I was subjecting myself to. I needed the dogs to be okay.” He dialed and scheduled to come get the dogs later that day.

After he hung up, Hannibal was still staring at him, pensive. When Will raised his eyebrows, the psychiatrist sighed. “You were well aware that your plan could result in your death. You have a firm regard for the lives of your dogs but seemingly no regard for your life. Are you yet at a point where you will concede that you are a regular perpetrator of self-violence?”

A moment of silence passed. “No.”

“You repeatedly subject yourself to Jack’s demands on you.”

“I repeatedly subject myself to you,” Will countered. He looked down at his plate, surprised to find it mostly empty. “I need to go get my dogs. Thanks for breakfast.”

“You’re welcome any time.”

He was on his way back from the dog kennel, all seven milling around in his backseat, when his phone rang. *Cleaning Windows* .

“Hello?”

“ *Will, it’s the Ripper.* ” Jack’s voice sounded dark, slightly shaky.

“What, calling me?”

“ *Funny, Will. A serial killer is active and you’re cracking jokes.* ”

Will scowled. *You better hope I don’t tell Hannibal about this attitude.* “What’s going on?”

“ *Miriam Lass is alive.* ”

No One Wants Me Here Less Than I Do

Having dropped off, fed, and let out his dogs, Will was back in the Volvo on his way back to stupid Baltimore. He dialed Hannibal.

" *Hello?* "

"You're an idiot."

" *What are you talking about?* "

"Jack found Miriam Lass."

" *I should hardly say he found her, she showed up on his doorstep.* "

Will blanched. This was the first time Hannibal hadn't maintained plausible deniability about being the Ripper.

As if hearing Will's thoughts, Hannibal huffed. " *He called me as well, to help you consult.* "

"Miriam Lass knows who you are."

" *No, I don't expect that she does."*

"I told you to leave Jack alone," Will said, knowing full well that Hannibal had kept the letter of his agreement.

“ *Firstly, Will, you should have told that to the Ripper,* ” Hannibal began, and Will scoffed. “ *Secondly, he did not physically harm Jack.”*

Will rolled his eyes, but said nothing.

“ *Was there a purpose to this call, other than to chastise me for the crimes of the Ripper?”*

“No.”

He heard the smile in Hannibal’s voice accompanying his placid, “*see you soon.* ”

Meeting Miriam Lass was uncomfortable for Will, not least because he had spent the last day and a half flirting with the man who abducted her.

She was pretty, if a little severe. Will felt that she looked only mildly traumatized for the years she had spent in the Ripper’s care. Her face showed no emotion when Hannibal crossed her line of vision. Frankly, Will thought she looked healthier than he did.

The only person feeling more awkward than Will was Jack. Will had never really understood his relationship with the trainee, only that it was laden with guilt. Lass clung to Jack the way Will imagined children clung to their fathers. Jack’s emotions were incredibly easy to feel, and the all-consuming guilt stuck to Will’s chest like tar.

Concerningly, Lass’s expression flickered a little when she looked at Will.

Will was ashamed of the relief that flooded his veins when it became obvious that she couldn’t remember anything. Hating the absorption of Jack’s emotions and the general breakdown of Miriam’s amnesia, Will went to go stand by the lab team, who were off to the side, scraping at her jacket from a hanger.

“Why are you even here?” Zeller asked. “There’s no scene, no one to empathize with, she’s alive.”

“No one wants me here less than I do,” Will grumbled.

Beverly sensed the teeming awkwardness and intervened. “Will, are we on for margaritas tomorrow?”

“It’s not dollar night yet, is it?”

“You can’t afford to drink margaritas unless they’re only a dollar?”

Will huffed. “Fine, sounds good.”

“Will!”

The profiler turned to see Hannibal approaching, clutching… His t-shirt. *Oh, God.* “I think you forgot this last night.”

Will dutifully ignored Beverly’s giant eyes and open mouth, along with Price’s and Zeller’s barely hidden shock. “Helpful,” He grumbled, taking his shirt and refusing to acknowledge the air of smugness radiating off of the cannibal like smoke.

Having apparently done sufficient damage to Will’s facade of normalcy, Hannibal turned and rejoined Jack and Miriam.

“Why did he have your shirt?” Beverly demanded, eyes alight.

“It’s not like you’re thinking.”

Beverly’s eyebrows furrowed. “Not an answer.”

“No,” Will sighed, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes. “I slept in his guest room.”

“After fucking him?” Price asked. “Or the other way around?”

Will just rolled his eyes, trying not to blush. He glanced at Beverly, then, in a stage whisper, said, “it’s just you and me tomorrow, right?”

“Hey! Invite us, we can be cool!” Price protested, and Zeller made a noise affirming.

“Definitely not invited,” Beverly said.

Jack called him over and Will reluctantly trudged over to the group of Hannibal, Miriam, and Jack. “What can you tell us?”

“I don’t know, Jack. There’s no scene.”

“Do your job!” Jack commanded. “Empathize!”

He saw Hannibal twitch in irritation, but spoke up first. “Why? When the person I’d empathize with is already here!” *On both murderer and victim counts.* “I empathize in place of a victim's testimony. The victim is here.”

“So, you can’t tell me anything? What’s the point of keeping you on the team when you can’t tell me anything? People will *die,* Will!”

“ *Jack.* ” Hannibal scolded.

“I understand that you feel guilty because you broke one agent, I don’t understand your insistence on breaking another,” Will said, voice deceptively calm.

Jack laughed humorlessly. “Feeling fragile, Will?”

“I’m just reflecting your emotions, Jack. You want to loathe somebody? Loathe yourself,” Will hissed, scowling. “I’m going home.”

Halfway back to Wolf Trap, he got a text from Hannibal.

Dr. Lecter: *You were magnificent today, Will.*

Will smiled, then caught himself smiling and scolded himself. Not four days ago, he was intent on professing his hatred for Hannibal. He thought of how badly it had hurt to realize Hannibal was lying to him. How, no matter what the cannibal said, Will would never be able to forget the betrayal he had felt. How could he believe him now? How was he supposed to know this wasn’t just another layer of deceit?

He hated him. Either Will hated Hannibal for what he had done to him, or Hannibal hated Will, which enabled him to do it. Still a freak, still a science project, still subhuman. Will stepped out of his car and let his dogs out of the house to run around, curling up on his porch with a throw blanket and a bottle of whiskey.

With this in mind, it was embarrassing to have protected Hannibal the way he had. Like a kicked dog that just keeps coming back to be kicked again. And, in the meantime, bites and snarls at anyone else that tries to get close. Alas, a third hate option presented itself: Will hated Will.

He was pathetic.

In the midst of his self loathing, he remembered how badly Hannibal hurt as he forced himself to say that he loved Will. How Hannibal forcibly pried his chest open to show Will, had been craving Will's approval desperately. How Hannibal had pressed a kiss to his forehead, more tenderly than Will had ever seen him. The fact that Hannibal had released a prisoner, a colossal risk, just to get back at Jack for his treatment of Will.

Maybe he wasn't the only pathetic one.

With that in mind, he finally replied to Hannibal's text.

Will Graham: *thanks*

Will Graham: *he's kind of a dick sometimes*

Will Graham: *oh, and thanks for my shirt.*

The reply came almost immediately.

Dr. Hannibal Lecter: *Yes, I think that's a fair assessment.*

Dr. Hannibal Lecter: *And you're welcome.*

Dr. Hannibal Lecter: *I look forward to you returning mine.*

Will Graham: *goodnight, Hannibal*

He whistled, calling in his dogs, and went into the house. It was dinnertime, so he cooked food for the dogs and doled it out, then went to lie in his bed.

If anyone asked him, he'd vehemently deny that he was still wearing Hannibal's shirt. He'd deny imagining the way the killer's arms had felt, tight around him. He'd certainly deny picturing the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* tableau the way other people picture bouquets of flowers.

Will Graham Does Not Gush!

Chapter Notes

> it's super short but I needed it to be a separate little interlude because it seems weird if I mash it in with the other chapters

"So…" Beverly began, drawing out the word. "There's nothing going on between you and Dr. Three-piece?"

Will sighed, slurping his third bright red cocktail. "No…" He hung on the word as well. "Nothing… Going on."

"Liar. What's happening?"

"Seriously, nothing. But there is… An air of something. Like when you're in the forest and you can hear water nearby, but you can't see it."

Beverly grinned. "And what do you want to happen?"

"You want me to gush?"

"I would love it if you would gush."

Will shook his head. "No way."

"But when you spent the night at his house, nothing happened?"

“Nothing beyond sleeping in a separate room, other than him kissing my forehead when he thought I was asleep.”

Beverly flagged down a waiter and ordered some chili fries, to which Will raised his eyebrows. “What, you don’t think he’d approve?”

“Of course not. But I also didn’t think *you’d* approve.”

“Yeah, whatever. So, if things are all kindergarten-innocent, why’s he so intent on giving you your shirt in front of everybody?”

“I don’t know, but I’m looking forward to returning the favor.”

Beverly took another drink of her margarita. “Maybe he’s possessive. Wants everybody to know you’re all his.”

A bolt of heat shot through his veins at the thought. “Hardly a lot of competition. Speaking of, how are the Eli’s?”

While Beverly was talking, Will’s phone vibrated with a text from Hannibal, asking him to dinner the following night. Despite his efforts to remain neutral, Beverly caught his expression and laughed. “Oh, God, you’re like… Embarrassingly bad.”

“Oh, shut up.”

What a Wicked Thing to Do, to Make Me Dream of You

Chapter Notes

> Okay, to be honest, I outwardly cringe at his little "I can see clearly now" line, but it is exactly the kind of thing Will "Ding Dong the Dragon's Dead" Graham would say, and I aim for relative realism. Even when it's painfully cliche. You'll see what I mean.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had been snowing all day. It was the kind mixed in with occasional rain to make the roads extra slick. Any other engagement, Will would have postponed. He usually postponed his engagements anyways, weather notwithstanding.

But he needed to see Hannibal. More embarrassingly, he *missed* him. Hannibal probably had texted him warning against coming, but Will had deliberately let his phone die to avoid being canceled on and/or called in by Jack. So he got into his car and hit the road. He made it probably five minutes before his car slid the first time, then another fifteen before he slid off the road and into a ditch.

Perfect, just perfect.

He tried to back up, to pull forward, his wheels just spun. If he could just get home, he could use his home phone to call Hannibal and explain. *Ugh, Hannibal would be so mad.* He kicked the door open and hobbled through the snow, pants turning dark and heavy with the moisture. The first rush of cold air was jarring to the point of making his chest burn. As he traipsed through the woods, Will felt his body adjusting. The cold was starting to burn less, his shivering dying down. *God* , how was the snow still so bad when it was barely even cold? It would probably turn to slush, soon, then he could get his car out of this ditch and drive to Baltimore.

He cracked his neck. No sense expending all of this energy to solve a problem that would solve itself in an hour. He sat down against a tree, leaning back against it. All he had to do was wait.

Someone was shaking him. Throwing him around against a tree, and it was scraping the back of his head. He tried to speak, to say, “stop that,” but what came out was more of a sad groan.

Jesus , this person smacked his face! Will tried squirming away, but felt a hand tighten into his curls. *“S-stop.* ” He groaned, and the person was saying his name.

Over and over, “Will, Will,” in a tone that was almost pleading.

He wanted to open his eyes, but he couldn’t. His eyelids were so, *so* heavy. Hands tucked underneath his knees and the top of his back, briefly moving to guide Will’s arms around his neck.

He felt his body lifted, then submerged in what must’ve been a sauna. Will tried to move, to get out of this boiler room, but heard the voice shushing him and petting over his head.

It was so *hot* , he felt like his skin was melting. His clothes clung to his skin, and he recognized this feeling, was he having a seizure? Had his brain caught fire again? It felt like it had. Was Hannibal experimenting on him again? He whined pitifully. “Why are you doing this to me?” Will tried to slur, with dubious success.

The voice shushed him again and fingers carded through his hair. Briefly, they re-entered the normal temperature world, then back into another sauna. Was he dead? Was he being burnt alive? It seemed like he was. The hands were tugging at his clothes, which were plastered to his skin. “What are you doing?” He tried again, but the words were still too slurred.

He finally pried his eyes open to see Hannibal throwing the soaked flannel and jeans onto the floor of his bathroom and then lowering him into a bathtub that felt scalding. Will grabbed Hannibal’s forearm. “Stop, please, it’s so hot.”

“It’s room temperature,” Hannibal murmured.

Oh, good, he could understand him. “You’re lying.”

“Will, you’re hypothermic. This water is less than eighty degrees Fahrenheit,” The Ripper said softly, pushing on Will’s shoulders to more fully submerge him.

“You’re not…” He groaned, trying to muscle through the burning sensation.

“This is not an experiment, nor a result of my interference. You did this all by yourself.”

His feet and hands had to be melting off. “I want out, let me out, please.”

“I’m sorry, Will, I can’t do that.” At Will’s protesting whine, Hannibal pet over his sweat-drenched curls and shushed him. “Ten minutes, Will. In ten minutes, we can get you out.”

As the time passed, it became slightly less painful. He shivered every minute or so, short bursts of discomfort which seemed to make Hannibal cringe. By minute nine, Will was more bothered by his embarrassment than by the shivering. “Why are you here?”

Hannibal gave him a relieved half-smile. “Alas, the gracious Will Graham has returned.” The psychiatrist stood and left the room, then returned with some new clothes for Will. He set them on the counter and then leaned down to help him out of the bathtub, and Will had the presence of mind to be grateful Hannibal had left his boxers on. “I’ll leave you to get dressed.”

Will managed to get dressed and then went into the kitchen, where Hannibal was cooking… Something, probably. “Why are you here?” He asked again.

“You were late for our conversation and ceased to answer your phone. I came to check on you, one of your dogs led me to you,” He said, voice distant.

Will crept up behind him, peering over his shoulder. “That’s enough food for six people, Hannibal.”

“You were hypothermic, you need to eat.” He almost sounded angry, why was he angry?

“Sorry about all this.”

The doctor shook his head, but said nothing.

Will sighed. “Something wrong, Dr. Lecter?”

“Why do you say that?”

The profiler stared into Hannibal’s face and merely raised his eyebrows in response.

Wordlessly, a ridiculously full plate was set in front of him, with more food than Will had eaten in the previous three days. Will dug in, and Hannibal sat across from him and did the same. Some time passed in silence, then Hannibal spoke. “Why did you insist upon going out in these conditions?”

I wanted to see you. Even that felt far too vulnerable. “24-hour cancellation policy,” He said instead. Hannibal’s expression could only be described as *unimpressed* .

“You should be more discerning with the danger you put yourself in,” He chided.

“Why?”

Hannibal’s face twitched. “In service of staying alive.”

“Oh,” Will said. “Right, that.”

“Is that not a cause you deem worthy?”

Will stretched, then wolfed down some of the dinner presented to him. “Unworthy? No. More… Uncompelling.”

Knife placidly sawing into the meat on his plate, Hannibal looked at Will, head tilted like a dog’s. “Some people use their relationships with others as a means of making surviving more compelling.”

“That would require a relationship with others,” Will said, smiling dryly.

Hannibal put down his knife and fork down and sat back, looking contemplatively at Will. “You still believe my fondness for you is false?”

“I don’t know what I believe.”

Silence fell over them like a rainstorm in the summer, accompanied by the thick humidity of awkwardness that sucked the air away like a vacuum. Will felt again like he might be drowning in it. Just as he decided to come up for air and make some sort of banal small talk, Hannibal spoke again.

“My sister and I had an experience with hypothermia when I was a child,” The psychiatrist said, seeming faraway. “Our parents were out of the picture and we were on the run. The Lithuanian winter was crueler even than usual. Mischa was five, so I was thirteen.”

He was thirteen when he first killed someone. Will thought.

“She succumbed first, because she was much smaller. I carried her for probably two miles, hoping to come upon a cabin or a windbreak. Unsurprisingly, I also succumbed. When we woke up, we were prisoners.” Hannibal’s face remained carefully blank, despite the fact that

he was being more vulnerable than ever. “I have never been so frightened as I was then.” He smiled plaintively. “Until I met you. You disappeared for a week, you faked a suicide attempt, you willingly subject yourself to conditions to induce hypothermia. You have invited fear into my life that rivals even that which I felt at the loss of my baby sister.”

Will saw, again, that small, dark-eyed, serious little boy, holding a littler girl, starving and shivering. Felt the pain of a thirteen year-old boy trying to stretch himself into an adult, trying desperately to think of a way out. Saw his tiny hands shaking, wrapping up his sister in his arms and trying to come up with something comforting to say while feeling hopeless.

He felt the same thing again as Hannibal desperately hauled him out of the snow and back to his home. Guilt curled chokingly in his chest, but he didn’t know what to say. He was still frightened of showing vulnerability to Hannibal, but he wanted to encourage the psychiatrist’s vulnerability with him.

He made himself look at the killer, seeing past the blankness of his face to see the terrified creature underneath, reaching out desperately but trembling for fear of being slapped away. Will rolled his lips between his teeth, then took Hannibal’s hand in his own, leaving them sitting on the table between their plates.

Hannibal stared at their joined hands as though the concept of them was unfamiliar to him. Tentatively, Will tightened his grip for a moment, which the other man repeated, then Will withdrew his hand and went back to eating. He let a moment pass before saying, “I never used to be able to picture you as a child.”

“Why not?”

“I just had a feeling you materialized into the world in a bespoke suit and knowing ten languages. I couldn’t imagine you having to endure something as undignified as growing up.”

Hannibal’s lips twitched like he was biting back a smile. “You speak as though this illusion has fractured.”

“I can see clearly now, the rain is gone,” Will quipped.

“You, on the other hand, are very easy to imagine as a child,” Hannibal said, and Will raised his eyebrows. “Many of the people in your life still treat you as one.”

Will raised his glass mockingly towards Hannibal. “Touche.”

“Can I plan to get my shirt back anytime soon, or should I presume to replace it?”

“I’m holding onto it,” Will said, smirking. “I fully intend to use it to embarrass you in front of your friends.”

Hannibal smiled benignly. “You are the only person I consider a friend.”

Will paused in their banter, trying desperately not to find this version of Hannibal endearing. “Me, too.” He took a bite of his food, then a far more comfortable silence descended upon them. A picture flashed through his head of how it would feel to scoot his chair closer to the psychiatrist and rest his head on his shoulder. He felt fairly certain that Hannibal would welcome it.

“Uncle Jack called me today. He wanted to know if I felt you were stable enough to stay in the field.”

“Should’ve said ‘no’,” Will grumbled. “What did you tell him?”

Hannibal nodded thoughtfully. “That I thought you had responded reasonably to a stressful situation.”

“Do you believe that?”

“No. I thought you underreacted.”

“You would’ve killed him,” Will surmised, and Hannibal just smiled. “I’m going to ask you something despite having a suspicion that I’ll hate the answer.”

“I suspect that’s how you feel about most questions you ask me.”

“Why does Miriam Lass recognize me?” Will asked, head down so he didn’t have to see Hannibal try to cover his expression. “Please don’t lie to me.”

A moment of silence passed, then Hannibal finally spoke. “I was planning on framing you for the Ripper’s murders. She does not recognize you, though. I have laid groundwork for an alternative.”

“Why?”

“Which part are you asking about?”

Will laughed humorlessly, heels of his hands pressed into his eye sockets. “Why would you do that? You’ve been content not to frame anyone for the Ripper murders until… You wanted to torture me?”

“It was hardly needless torture,” Hannibal defended, face remaining blank but voice indicating that he thought Will was the one being ridiculous. “You were getting far too close to discovering the truth, I need to discredit you. The invocation of your rage was just an interesting side effect.”

“So I would, in your mind, just… Go to prison? Where I would get the death penalty or stay in a cage for the rest of my life?”

Hannibal’s expression didn’t change from its default placidity, but it felt like he wanted to scoff. “Of course not. You would only need to stay in prison long enough for media attention to blow over so the public no longer had regard for your opinion. Then the Ripper would

commit another murder and exculpate you, and we could continue our conversations unencumbered by fear."

The psychiatrist was speaking as though this was a completely reasonable solution, framing your friend for murder and sending them into the American Prison System to be psychologically tortured for an undetermined amount of time. Will rolled his lips between his teeth and nodded, carefully damming off the roiling ocean of emotions from showing on his face. "You can stay here tonight, the roads are terrible," He said, then stood and took his dishes to the sink. "I'll sleep on the couch, I'm sure you're familiar with where everything is if you need something." As he unwound his headphones and plugged them in, he chuckled cruelly. "If you'd like to take this opportunity to remove any planted evidence, that would be great. Good night, Dr. Lecter."

He hoped Hannibal could feel it, could feel the water eroding at their relationship, putting back a distance that had almost been eaten away. "Will, I can hardly take your bed from you."

"That wasn't a suggestion. I'm sleeping on the couch whether you're here or not. If you want to sleep on the floor, God knows I can't stop you."

"Will-" Hannibal began, but Will held up his headphones and shook them meaningfully, then jammed them into his ears, collapsing onto the couch.

He turned up *Wicked Game* , thinking back to the time of his life where this song was his lifeline; Being a kid on the spectrum in New Orleans did not a pleasant life make. He remembered a boy in his school who had taken particular issue with Will: Paul. Paul, like probably everyone else, found Will 'creepy.' In retrospect, probably a fair assessment, but he reacted to it in a regrettable way. Shoulder-checking Will in the hallway, deliberately knocking his books over, closing his locker on his hand, etc. Usual bully cliches.

All of that was bearable, Will was no stranger to physical violence, he didn't find pain particularly concerning. The problem was that no one *fucking believed him.* His father and friends (as few as they were) bade Will tell faculty members, so he did. When they'd confront Paul, however, he'd put on this innocent little face and talk about how he would *never* do that, how it hurt his feelings that Will would even say so. He would act like he pitied the empath; Will remembered him saying to an administrator, once, "I don't blame him. It's so sad that people pick on retards so much that they can't recognize friendliness." And the staff had just *melted* at Paul's stupid bullshit kindness.

It completely discredited Will. For the rest of his short time at that school, no teachers

believed anything he said. He did thank Paul, eventually, for teaching him a valuable lesson: *There is no justice in the world unless someone makes it* . Will had expressed his gratitude as he pummeled Paul into the ground, knocking out his teeth and permanently damaging his eyesight. He didn't stop until someone pulled him off, and when Paul's bloodied, bruised face managed to look up at Will, he must've seen the empath's smile.

He let himself imagine, in the present, pummeling Hannibal. Will wasn't sure he wanted to *kill* his psychiatrist, but he certainly wanted to cause him some pain, at least he felt it would soothe his burning pride.

It didn't feel the same, though. When he used to fantasize about beating the shit out of Paul, it felt cleansing. Like being baptized, a way to clear off the blight on his dignity by putting it on someone else's. Paul was intentionally hurting Will, antagonizing him just because he didn't like him. To destroy him was simply restoring balance.

That was the difference, he supposed: Hannibal wasn't hurting him because he disliked him. Ostensibly, Hannibal felt that his crimes against Will were done for his own good. He wanted to see Will when he wasn't weighed down by societal expectations, wanted to free him from the cause of his self-loathing. And Will could hardly fault him for not wanting to get caught, Hannibal could hardly predict that the FBI's top profiler would be so quick to ignore his status as a serial killer.

The thing that hurt the worst wasn't the fact that Hannibal was willing to hurt him and put him in danger. It wasn't that, for someone he purported to love, Hannibal acted a lot like people who hated Will. It was that, even after all of it, Will still wanted him. He wanted Hannibal to love him, wanted him to be proud of him, intimidated by him, comfortable with him, he wanted all of it. The worst part of this whole affair was that it proved that Hannibal being evil did not make Will love him any less. Drowning in two feet of water, once again.

When Will opened his eyes, his cheeks were wet.

He batted tears away from his eyes, seeing that only an hour and a half had passed. He sat up, finding that a heavier throw blanket had been tossed over him on the couch, and Hannibal was asleep in the chair facing him. His Judas heart stuttered, a bolt of adoration shooting

through his veins. The Chesapeake Ripper, Will figured, was worried about him. Worried that he had been too frozen, too close to death, and couldn’t help but to watch him sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I've abandoned my cool, mysterious, 'I don't care' no-capitals style of typing in these notes. It was dishonest, I care a lot.

"God Help Me", in Which God Specifically Does Not Help Him

God help me, he thought, then scoffed at himself.

Briefly, Will took a moment to consider how he became a person who could not only forgive the Chesapeake Ripper, but could defend him and love him.

God help me was not an unusual thread of thought for Will. Growing up in the Bible Belt, he had prayed for *years* , begging to be different, to be a less difficult child, to have fewer dangerous thoughts, to be forgiven for the ones he had. In all these years of prayer, he discovered two things:

Firstly, people, particularly in the Southern church community, have many ways to blame unanswered prayers on the person doing the praying. On the rare occasions that he did turn to the church with questions, needing help or support or even a modicum of sympathy, he got the same platitudinous responses: *keep tryin', God rewards patience,* and *maybe you're prayin' for the wrong things,* and even better, *it's because your faith isn't strong enough, Will. Try rereadin' Job.* Despite attending seven different impoverished public schools and their respective community churches, Will found that these hackneyed bumper-sticker sentiments were reliably present and pervasive. Somehow, turning to the church had turned the church against him. Too different, too quick to question, not good enough at picking up on the social cues that told everyone else to shut their gosh darn mouths and sing a song.

There was seemingly no religion that would accept Will, so why should he accept them? Furthermore, why should he accept the morals that those religions tried to scare people into obeying? He didn't.

There are, however, across the world, hundreds of millions of non-religious people who still adhere to a strict moral compass. Things they learned from society, or from their parents, or their friends. Unfortunately for Will, society had shunned and repudiated him from the start gate. Every person he met was too easy to read and found him to live on the wrong side of creepy. Big, blank-looking eyes that wouldn't quite meet theirs but still saw too much, moving more than people in Witness Protection, seemingly random bouts of anger against 'good, upstanding citizens'; not a recipe for social conformity.

It was even worse when he tried to seem like the rest of society. In the way that people are afraid of clowns because of the fake expression painted on their faces, people feared Will. Like when cartoon characters look a little too lifelike but they're still clearly not real, that's how people saw him. Nobody could say it to his face, maybe because they were scared of the lurking creature under his skin, but he could feel it all the same. Of course he could, he could feel everything, the disdain, the discomfort, all of it directed *at him* . How was a person supposed to emerge from that environment with anything other than venom for the people who had inadvertently made him despise himself?

Society aside, family was an even greater shortcoming. His mother had taken one look at Will, possibly the very day he gained consciousness of mind, and decided she wanted no part in that nonsense, leaving a three-year old little boy and a drunkard who resented him for being a reminder of what could have been. Contrary to Hannibal's apparent belief, Will's father wasn't abusive. Well, he wasn't *that* abusive. Will could count on two hands the times his father had raised a hand to him, which, for the geographical area, was fairly low. The physical altercations between them were meaningless to Will, especially after he had orchestrated his father's death.

It was the apathy that he detested.

Once, when he was eleven, Will tried to 'run away', as all kids do. He took it to new extremes, and disappeared for three nights. When he came back on the fourth day, his father was the exact same. In fact, his only words to Will were, "how was school today?"

Friendship, ultimately, could be negated as a factor, because many of his friends were only masquerading as such because they thought he was mentally handicapped and felt sorry for him in that condescending way that southern Christians see anyone the least bit different.

Until Hannibal, his mind meanly corrected, to which he rolled his eyes. And there it was again, a prayer he had shot up probably a hundred times since meeting Hannibal Lecter, *God help me* .

The second thing he realized was that God had selective deafness when it came to the pleas of Will Graham.

From where it was stashed under his back, he felt his phone vibrate. He rolled his eyes upon seeing it was case-related, from Jack, as usual. Pictures and everything, and Will had a horrible, suffocating thought: What if Hannibal was using him as a coverup?

Maybe Hannibal had predicted that Will would accept him, knowing as he did the lack of affection Will had experienced in his life and how it had tied him to his psychiatrist. Maybe he knew, then, that he'd have a guaranteed man on the inside actively sabotaging investigations against him. Maybe his rescuing Will was like Jack's defenses of Will, only in service of utility. Maybe, maybe, maybe-

No. No, Hannibal wouldn't have told him about Mischa, wouldn't have commodified the tragedy with his sister just to manipulate Will. He wouldn't have foregone a comfortable bed to sit on a chair and stare at him as he slept, wouldn't have kissed his forehead as he slept. He wouldn't have-

Liar. He would. Hannibal Lecter's scope of manipulation knew no bounds, and Will was being naive to think that there was anything the Ripper could do that would convince Will that Hannibal wanted anything other than a helpful abettor.

Nevertheless, there were a great many things Will could do, Hannibal's reactions to which would be rather enlightening on this front. With this in mind, he agreed to meet Jack at a crime scene the next day, assuming that the roads would be cleared. He quietly called a tow truck to bring his Volvo home, and then he commenced his plotting.

Certain Kind of Fool

Chapter Notes

> TW: Implied/Referenced Suicide, again, but it didn't actually happen, again. He's just a lying guy, okay?

In an attempt to undo the damage Hannibal's shirt stunt had done to his reputation, Will made them drive separately to the crime scene. This had the added advantage of allowing himself the drive to listen to some specific playlists to put him in the right mindset for the Oscar-level acting he was about to perform.

The advantage of a lifetime of attempting to fake normalcy was that he was quite good at faking emotions, most of his expressed emotions were insincere. He only hoped he could pull off something so overt.

Luckily, the scene was every bit as gruesome in person as it had appeared over the pictures. Will let the pendulum swing, gaining enough intel to help them narrow down a suspect group, then Will made himself turn on the spigot of specious logic that would hopefully clear everything up.

In plain view of Jack and Hannibal, but appearing as though he were trying to hide, Will pushed his hands against his eyes and crouched on the ground, sniffling faux-quietly. Predictably, Hannibal came and knelt next to him, putting a hand on his trembling shoulder, and Jack turned to face the both of them. Will shook his head into his hands, then looked up, eyes and face red. "I'm sorry, Jack, I can't do this anymore."

"Do what?" Jack asked, voice stormy.

Will stood, walking in a circle and sniffling more. "A caseload of this size, it's getting to me. I can't keep doing this much, I'm barely sleeping, every night I see that *St. Teresa* thing, and…" He took a shuddering breath. "Last week, I drafted a suicide note."

Jack was always ridiculously easy to read. He was torn between the guilt of having nearly broken his very favorite screwdriver and fear at the thought of no longer having it. “Will, that’s why you have Dr. Lecter. We need you to keep doing this, we can increase your sessions, maybe get you on some medication-”

“I *can’t* , Jack.” He sobbed, mentally applauding himself. “Please don’t make me keep doing this much.”

“People will die, Will. *Real,* innocent people.” Will wanted to protest the implication that he was not also a real, innocent person who might die, and he could sense Hannibal feeling the same. *Prepare yourself, Dr. Lecter, I’m not on your fucking side either.*

“Then don’t take me off all of them. I can do these dinky ones, just…” He heaved a sigh. “Take me off the Ripper.”

“You can’t be serious,” Jack scolded. “Will, we *need* to catch him, we can't do it without you!”

“You can’t do it *with* me, either, and you’re going to lose the option if I don’t take a step back,” Will snapped, then shook his head at the ground, doing his best to look defeated. “Look, Jack, I don’t think I can be of much help with him anyway. I can’t empathize with him the way I can with other killers, his MO is too variable, his motive is too random, I’m not helping.”

“Do you know something?” Jack accused, and Will wanted to grimace, hoping he wasn’t going to have to pull this card but ultimately committed to the role.

“Last night I took an entire bottle of sleeping pills in my bathtub,” He said grimly. “The only reason I’m here is because I missed my therapy. Dr. Lecter came by to make sure I was okay.” Will’s gaze flicked up to Jack, who looked truly horrified.

He allowed himself a moment to glance at Hannibal, whose expression was cautiously blank, but doing a terrible job at hiding rapturous interest.

“Did I do this to you, Will?”

Will scoffed. “No one *did this to me* . I’m off the Ripper cases, Jack. I’m sorry. I’m going home.”

“May I come with you?” Hannibal piped up, and Will had to repress a smirk. “You shouldn’t be alone when you’re feeling this way.”

“Sure. I’ll see you in Wolf Trap.”

The drive to Wolf Trap was one that Will filled by congratulating himself on breaking new records of psychosis and acting skills. He did his best not to think of the fact that he may have just torpedoed his relationship with his favorite serial killer, nor to dwell on what Hannibal’s reaction would be.

He was sitting on his porch, letting the dogs run free and listening to his father’s old radio, when the Bentley pulled into his driveway.

Hannibal offered him a hand and pulled him up off the stoop. “You shouldn’t sit out here in the cold after last night,” He scolded, and Will was going to make a snide remark, but Hannibal distracted him by lifting his hand to his mouth and kissing his knuckles.

Like a teenager, Will’s breath picked up at the chaste contact. “Are you angry?”

“Angry?” Hannibal asked, seeming surprised. “No. Did you expect me to be?”

“Maybe.”

Hannibal stared at him a minute, then his eyes widened slightly in realization. “You suspect that I am using you to hijack investigations. You have removed yourself from them to see whether my interest in you persists.”

Will just shrugged, looking out over his property. “Does it?”

“Unfortunately,” Hannibal said, and the profiler raised his eyebrows. “You seem to be under the impression that you are the only one reluctant to pursue this. I can assure you that you are not.”

“Why? My hesitance is based on your deception.”

Hannibal huffed, breath fogging in the cold air. The radio was playing behind them, an Eagles song that Will distantly recognized-- *Certain Kind of Fool.* How apt. “My fondness for you has enabled you to deceive me. To care about something, in my experience, is to invite weakness into my life. Before you, I rarely felt fearful or uncertain. Now, with you in my life, there is very little of which I am certain. My own psychiatrist has told me that pursuing a relationship with you is a bad idea.” He smiled wistfully. “I simply find myself unable to stop.”

“I know the feeling,” Will said. A beat of silence passed, and Will sighed. “That’s not the only reason that I quit.”

“Oh?”

“I can’t keep coming up with reliably plausible lies,” He confessed, and Hannibal’s face, underneath its blank mask, lit up.

“You won’t be telling the truth?”

Will’s head tilted sideways, and for a moment, he almost felt bad for Hannibal. “No, I won’t.”

“You were truly a splendor to watch, your performance with Jack.”

Smiling, Will led them inside the house, the dogs thundering in behind them. “Yeah, I bet it was really entertaining.”

“When you shed the cloak of decency you wear, what reveals itself is resplendent.”

Will glanced up at him, trying to detect any shred of insincerity. What he found was closer to worship than anything else. Uncomfortable, he pivoted, both physically and conversationally. “Think a lot about me shedding articles of clothing?” He asked, pouring two glasses of whiskey and offering one to the psychiatrist.

“I think about a great many things,” Hannibal answered vaguely, but there was a glint in his eye that both warned of danger and lured Will in.

Will downed his whiskey, then plucked the glass he had handed Hannibal away and downed that as well. “Want to go for a walk?”

The cannibal acquiesced neutrally, and Will whistled to Winston and they set off into the woods.

Mutual Assured Destruction: Part II

Chapter Notes

> Last real one before the epilogue! I think that it feels a little abrupt, but I also think any genuine, complete closure feels unrealistic and dishonest for this particular pairing.

"This dog is the one that led me to you," Hannibal commented just after they had crossed the threshold of the woods.

Will smiled down at the creature. "Yeah, this is Winston. He's probably my most devoted fan."

When he glanced up, Hannibal was staring at him. "It is interesting to see the adoration with which you look at your dogs. You are rarely so effusive when interacting with your fellow man."

"I like my dogs, I don't like my fellow man."

Hannibal chuckled, following a few steps behind Will.

The profiler took a deep breath, leading them towards his favorite overlook in the forest. They remained silent through the walk, Hannibal unsurprisingly fit, likely from all of the calories murdering people burned. Will swayed slightly from the whiskey, swigging more from his flask when his thoughts became too overwhelming along their hike. When they reached the big rock with a view over the river, Will sat down on it, gesturing for Hannibal to do the same. Side by side, they looked out towards the horizon. Will inhaled shakily, then spoke. "I don't know where we go from here."

In his periphery, he saw Hannibal nod. "If you were not bound by the morals of the world around you-"

“That’s not it,” Will interrupted, the whiskey on an empty stomach burning through his filter as quickly as his liver. “It’s not them. It’s us. If I relinquish control to you, even if I want it, too, that gives you power.”

“Not nearing the quantity of power that you wield,” Hannibal contested quietly. “If your mind abandoned you, for five minutes, what would you do?”

“Touch you,” He blurted out, ignoring his blushing. That wasn’t *really* what he meant, though. He wanted to touch Hannibal, obviously, to kiss him and suck bruises into his neck, but that wasn’t to what he was referring. Embarrassingly, what he wanted was much more tender. He liked when it felt like Hannibal was human, so he wanted to feel him, to feel if he was real. In his mind, he imagined carding his trembling fingers through caraway hair, pressing their foreheads together, hiding his face in Hannibal’s shoulder.

To his surprise, he heard Hannibal sigh tremulously. “And, if you weren’t so intent on keeping control, where would we go from here?”

“Anywhere. Or we could stay. We could just go on like normal, with…”

“Benefits?” Hannibal’s smirk was almost audible.

Will rolled his eyes. “It could be the same as now, but with a… Teammate.”

The smirk dropped off Hannibal’s face as quickly as it came, replaced by an expression better suited for that starving, dark-eyed little boy who had just lost his sister. “In what capacity?”

“You know what capacity.”

When he glanced up, Hannibal was staring at him. Will could see it in his mind, a hand reaching out, knowing a slap was equally as likely as a caress. Crossing into the literal world,

he took Hannibal's hand in his own.

The psychiatrist's grip tightened a moment, then he spoke. "You still do not trust me."

"No."

"You would attach yourself to someone you did not trust?"

Will smiled ruefully. "I don't trust myself either. You are dangerous, so am I."

"Mutual Assured Destruction," Hannibal mused, and Will wanted to laugh at how similar it was to his own thought processes. "Do you intend to stay here forever? I would like to show you Florence."

"If we leave now," *before we're federally wanted criminals,* he thought. "We don't have to be on the run. We could bring the dogs."

"And Abigail."

Will felt the smile spread across his face. "I'm willing to leave at some point. Not until Abi is more stable, though. And-" he remembered to whom he was speaking. "Never mind."

"I would like to know what you were going to say."

"It's not so interesting."

"You were going to say you look forward to reporting this information to Agent Katz."

Will sighed, eyes rolling. “Yes. She has a very diluted version of this story, she should get to hear the ending.”

“And how would you describe this ending?” Hannibal asked.

“I would tell her all she needs to know: that it’s beautiful.”

Epilogue: If Only

Chapter Notes

It's super short.

The man sewn into a giant eyeball in a silo aside, Will had been having a great day.

He had spent the night with Hannibal, which was fairly unusual even now, three months into their relationship, as Hannibal needed time to be a menace to society and Will resented being used as an alibi.

As a result of Hannibal's presence, he had gotten a full six hours of sleep, good coffee, and a massive breakfast that morning. That said, he had specifically *not* spent the night with Hannibal the night before, which was likely when this man was sewn into this color palette. He told Jack that the killer was in the tableau, and that the man had likely been sewn in by another killer.

"How are these killers finding each other so long before we find them?" Jack huffed.

"Maybe there's a dating site for them. GarrotersOnly.com," Price posited, and Will huffed a laugh. "Did you just laugh? At a joke? Are you possessed?"

Will blinked. "It was funny."

Zeller jumped in. "You never laugh at anything we say!"

"You usually aren't funny."

“Can we focus?” Jack demanded, as though he was wrangling a middle school math

team and not a group of the FBI’s finest.

“Too bad we can’t hire a killer, they seem to be the only ones who can find each other,” Price said instead.

Will thought about the pedophile he and Hannibal had killed only a week earlier and the sausage in his breakfast. “If only.”

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